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The Role of Brand Communications in Consumer Purchases of Organic Foods: A Research Framework

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Despite a high level of awareness about organic foods in the marketplace, consumer purchases remain relatively low. This article develops a research framework for translation of relatively high consumer awareness of organic foods to increased consumer purchases. Literature review reveals that both a lack of knowledge in how foods qualify as organic and consumers' mistrust in the way organizations apply the word organic prevents consumers from engaging in organic food purchases. Furthermore, being organic is no longer enough as organic products have become commoditized in the marketplace. With such an increasing commoditization of organic products, there is a growing pressure for organics to more effectively differentiate themselves. Accordingly, there is a dual branding opportunity for upgrading the current state of consumer awareness into both a higher volume of purchases and expanding the consumer base. This article proposes a research framework utilizing brand communications that could play a central role in triggering higher levels of consumer awareness, translating into increased volumes of organic purchases. This research framework considers consumer benefits an antecedent to brand communications and organic knowledge and consumer trust the mediators in influencing consumer organic purchases.

KEYWORDS *brand communications, consumer benefits, organic knowledge, consumer trust, organic purchases*

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INTRODUCTION

The production and sale of organic foods continues to expand rapidly. The market for products positioned on the basis of ethical standards such as natural or organic has been thriving and showing a continuous annual growth over the last few years (Massa & Testa, 2012). Once the domain of farm-gate country folk and urban hippies, organic food is gaining more interest from major food manufacturers and retailers (Kaplan, 2008). As a result, burgeoning consumer interest in organically grown foods has opened new market opportunities for producers and retailers (Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2011; Salleh, Ali, Harun, Jalil, & Shaharudin, 2010; Zepeda & Nie, 2012). The current global environmental concerns and consumer orientations have set powerful political, economic, and marketing forces in motion, focused on consumer awareness of health and sustainability issues. These transformations have increased the availability of organic food to conventional food retailers, with the majority of supermarkets now retailing organic food (Chen & Lobo, 2012; Greene & Dimitri, 2003). Not only is there continued strong demand for fresh produce, but there is growth in demand for a range of organic products, including those based on grains, dairy, and meats. This growth provides an opportunity for farmers to innovate and expand production of a range of agricultural commodities, and as they enter these markets, their need for information specific to organic production and marketing will increase. Thus, marketers must take a more dynamic view of brand communications that reflects the realities of a changing communication environment where brands have to communicate new benefits in order to respond to shifting consumer trends.

The involvement in the organic foods sector has attracted interest of small-scale farmers, major retailers, global food conglomerates, and consumer activists (Broberg, 2010). The recent growth of store brands (e.g., Wal-Mart) has also substantially influenced the retail industry, particularly in the context of nondurable consumer goods (Chen & Lobo, 2012; Lamey, Deleersnyder, Dekimpe, & Steenkamp, 2007). Many food suppliers reacted to this trend by enhancing nutritional and health values into their communications to demonstrate nutritional product advantages (Aschermann-Witzel & Hamm, 2010; Krystallis & Chrysochou, 2011). Responding to this development in consumer demand, manufacturers and retailers are enhancing their marketing and branding endeavors of organic foods. An already-crowded retail space creates a challenge for many brands to reenergize and reinvent themselves and to remain relevant to consumers.

The growth of the Australian organic food industry is strongly influenced by the international markets—particularly the European markets that take up to 70% of Australia's organic exports (Baker, 2007; Smith & Paladino, 2010). In Australia, the estimated annual growth of organic production is 16% (Department of Primary Industries, 2007). Despite capturing a relatively

small proportion of the food market, organic foods are seen as a legitimate alternative to the industrialized systems of food production and have achieved a high public profile (Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Grice, 2004). It has been reported that 60% of consumers purchase organic foods, which results in almost \$1 billion of sales in Australia, though it accounts for only 1% of the overall domestic food market (Mitchell, Kristiansen, Bez, & Monk, 2010).

Foods classified as organic are produced in accordance with the standards throughout all the stages of production and are certified by the industry body (Lyons, Lockie, & Lawrence, 2001). "Organic foods generally contain less harmful additives and more primary and secondary nutrients than conventional foods" (Chen, 2009, p. 166). As a result, consumers tend to perceive organic foods as healthier (Zagata, 2012) and less processed than conventional foods (Lyons et al., 2001). Essentially, the term *organic* reflects a product form, thus leading to some researchers speculating if the term *organic* can be looked at as a brand per se (e.g., Hall, 2008).

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines *brand* as a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or groups or sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition. As Keller (2003) and Keller and Lehmann (2006) noted, these differences exist on the product-related or intangible level of a brand. Therefore, the concepts and models developed in the context of brand communication could be applied to the organics and should be capable of providing insight into challenges of organic consumption.

Over the past five years, Australia's organic farming industry has grown at a healthy pace of 11.6% per annum, and IBISWorld expects the industry will continue to grow, increasing its revenue by 14.9% over 2012–2013 to be worth \$578.9 million (Dobie, 2012). Supermarkets have responded quickly by increasing organic product ranges to improve accessibility. Despite a wider accessibility of organics, providers face multiple challenges in the marketplace. A case in point was Wal-Mart's unsuccessful attempts to democratize organic food, making products affordable for those who are reluctant to pay premiums of 20% to 30% when, in fact, consumers perceived organic foods as more premium (Warner, 2006).

The consumer perspective of organic food purchases has been researched in European studies (Chinnici, D'Amico, & Pecorino, 2002; Hill & Lynchehaun, 2002; Padel & Foster, 2005). However, little attention has been devoted to organic food purchasing within the Australian market (see Smith & Paladino, 2010; Sultan & Pearson, 2011, for exceptions). Despite a growing interest in the literature to the economics of the organic food industries (e.g., Poulston & Yiu, 2011; Smith & Paladino, 2010), little is known about consumer decision-making regarding organic products in the retail context. Most of the studies have focused on the consumer

profile (e.g., demographics), not about the factors that influence actual consumer behaviors (Aschemann-Witzel & Hamm, 2010; Padel & Foster, 2005). Researchers have yet to explain why consumer purchases remain low in comparison to the high consumer awareness of organic foods (Sultan & Pearson, 2011).

Despite the growing relevance of distinguishing organic food brands, research has yet to focus on the differentiation approach (Bauer, Heinrich, & Schafer, 2012). There have been some exceptions that looked into the link between organic brand communications and consumer purchases in the organic sector. Ngobo (2011) contended the relevance of branding in the organic food sector by stating, "If the consumer decides to buy an organic product, then she/he must decide which organic brand to choose" (p. 92). In their study of manufacturers' and private brands, De Pelsmacker, Janssens, Sterckx, and Mielants (2005) found that the brand is an important attribute in consumer preferences and that consumers show more preference for mass media advertising over simply an informative brochure and for manufacturer brands over store brands. Previous studies have noted the importance of brand names in consumer evaluations of brands, in that brand names assist consumers in recalling certain benefits (Heckler, Keller, Houston, & Avery, 2014; Janiszewski & van Osselaer, 2000), in making product inferences and evaluations (Zinkhan & Prenshaw, 1994), and they play an important role in reputation and product choice (Holden & Vanhuele, 1999). Brand communication was found to play an important role in creating favorable brand attitudes (e.g., Turley & Moore, 1995) and is a key to "tangibilize" the perception of products, particularly those that are relatively new to the market (Centeno & Hart, 2012; Terril, 1992). The main implication from these studies is that brand communication is a critical integrative element in managing brand relationships with consumers (Zehir, Sahin, Kitapci, & Ozsanih, 2011).

The current study builds a research framework that proposes brand communications to play a central role in influencing consumer purchases of organic foods. Consumer everyday purchases of organic food and perishable commodities often rely on trust as well as on interpretations of information printed on products (Clement, Andersen, & Jensen, 2012). The proposed model, therefore, considers organic knowledge an important mediator in this relationship. Organic products are the credence goods, which makes the inclusion of consumer trust in the framework particularly important. Therefore, our research framework considers consumer trust another mediator in the relationship between brand communications and organic purchases. The model also views brand communications as influenced by consumer-perceived brand benefits. This leads to the consideration of relevant branding and consumer marketing studies, which build up to the research propositions. The article concludes with implications and suggestions for the future research.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Consumer Benefits and Brand Communications

Understanding consumer benefits has been a strategic imperative for producers and retailers alike. From a retailing perspective, Hartnett (1998, p. 21) noted that “when retailers satisfy people-based needs, they are delivering value, which puts them in a much stronger position in the long-term.” Burden (1998, p. 2) built on this view by commenting that “successful retailers increasingly target their offers toward two consumer categories: those with the emphasis on value and those for whom time pressure is the key.” Organic food sellers need to understand what customer value is and where they have to focus to achieve the needed marketplace advantage (Woodruff, 1997). Zeithaml (1998, p. 14) regarded consumer-perceived value in terms of a tradeoff between two value components: quality and price. Other researchers have viewed value as a tradeoff between quality and price too limited (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991a, 1991b; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Sheth et al. (1991a, 1991b) developed a theoretical framework that advocates a broader approach toward consumer value and captures five value dimensions including social, emotional, functional, epistemic, and conditional value dimensions. Babin et al. (1994) contended that the consumption process is driven not only by the product functions but also a hedonic component, which compared to shopping’s utilitarian benefits is more subjective and reflects potential entertainment and emotional worth derived from the purchase (Bellenger, Steinberg, & Stanton, 1976). In the context of organic foods, this means brands facilitate a perceived hedonism that can vary from an outstanding flavor to a feeling that one made a smart choice (Anisimova, 2007). Sweeney and Soutar (2001) also advocated multidimensionality of consumer value and suggested a framework that captures utilitarian benefits along with emotional and social components within consumer value.

Earlier studies have suggested that premium brands such as organics offer exceptional perceived hedonism compared to their nonorganic counterparts (e.g., Jonas & Roosen, 2005; McEachern & McClean, 2002; Roddy, Cowan, & Hutchinson, 1994). This suggests the importance of applying a broader theoretical framework to consumer-perceived value of organics and consideration of multiple consumption value dimensions that can make varying contributions in different purchasing situations (Heckler et al., 2014; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). However, organic food sellers typically use the brand’s perceived environmental friendliness to intensify “green” values in order to stimulate consumer purchases. Previous studies show the more environmentally friendly concerned a consumer is, the higher the likelihood of them purchasing organic food (Squires, Juric, & Cornwell, 2001). However, increasingly it is being shown that consumers do not always

purchase sustainable products because of their concern for the environment and community benefits but primarily for the purposes of maintaining good health and a desire to belong to certain social groups (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006).

A McKinsey survey (Bonini & Oppenheim, 2008) found that 87% of consumers are concerned about the environmental and social impact of their purchases, but only 33% actually buy green products. We argue that when it comes to assessing organics, one should expect consumers to use multiattribute evaluations due to various credence attributes and organic standards that consumers evaluate them against. As Centeno and Hart (2012) pointed out, in today's marketing practices marketing approaches should coexist as a means to communicate differently and at different times with particular types of customers. More recent research has maintained that marketers should formulate a unique selling proposition that not only appeals to consumer environmental friendliness but also triggers their hedonistic and sensory motives, such as perceived safety and perceived healthiness (Bauer et al., 2012). The previous research has suggested that hedonistic values sometimes prevail when consumer makes a choice in favor of organics. A case in point is Chryssohoidis and Krystallis's (2005) study of Greek consumers that found symbolic consumer value, such as self-respect and enjoyment of life, to be the primary motivators for organic food purchases. At the same time, values corresponding to the motive of environmental protection through organic farming were of a lesser importance to consumers. Likewise, it has been demonstrated that perceived superior product taste and perceived superior nutrition were the primary purchase drivers for organics, whereas consumers struggled to perceive environmental issues (i.e., protection of biodiversity and wildlife) as directly beneficial to them (Mitchell et al., 2010). These findings are in line with academic research that identifies sensory hedonistic values (e.g., flavor) as an important buying motive for organic foods versus a nonorganic product (McEachern & McClean, 2002; Roddy, Cowan, & Hutchinson, 1994). These findings lead to the important question of what consumers actually look for in organics and how organic food sellers should position their offerings. Clearly, the value implied by organic products is complex, and marketers will benefit from a further understanding of consumer benefits rather than rely on an assumed consumer perpetual concern for the environment. Recent research found that a brand's value (i.e., consumer emotional benefit) can influence consumers' brand attitudes and beliefs about the brand (e.g., Ruth, 2012) and subsequently increase the consumer adoption of and relationship with the brand (Sinha, Ahuja, & Medury, 2011). This suggests that there is a unique branding opportunity for helping to translate the existing consumer awareness into purchases. Therefore, our first proposition is postulated as follows:

- P1: Consumer benefits will have a direct effect on building brand communications for organic foods

Brand Communications and Organic Knowledge

Historically belonging to marketing, branding has not received much attention outside that field (see Di Monaco, Cavella, Di Marzo, & Masi, 2004; Guinard, Uotani, & Schlich, 2001, for exceptions in sensory and consumer science). However, to understand consumer tradeoffs between multiple factors in organic food-related decisions, practitioners need to take brand communication into consideration. Today, companies compete in markets that are fragmented and crowded with offerings, where even strong brands face challenges in creating a differential competitive advantage (Clancy & Trout, 2002). To overcome this challenge, marketing practitioners constantly look for the ways to generate appropriate brand associations in consumer minds to differentiate their brands from the competition.

Deciding on effective brand communications represents a major challenge for the marketers, as these are central to building consumer perception and consumer product choices (e.g., Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Pham & Muthukrishnan, 2002). As consumers continue to bridge and co-develop brands with or without support of firms, their interaction, including their own communication, is becoming crucial to understanding brand communication practices (Centeno & Hart, 2012; Hung & Li, 2007). Despite a growing importance for organic foods to differentiate themselves, there has been limited research into the branding of organics (see Bauer et al., 2012, for an exception). Hall (2008) maintained that more in-depth analysis is required to understand how to position organics and suggested communicating organics from an instrumental/symbolic consumer benefit perspective.

Zehir et al. (2011) contended that brand communication influences consumer responses, and its effect can be measured by analyzing brand recall and brand recognition as well as strength, uniqueness, and favorability of brand associations in consumer memory. Past marketing studies provided evidence to support the impact of brand communications on various elements of consumer knowledge (i.e., consumer perceptions and attitudes; see Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991; Rao & Ruekert, 1994). More recent research has suggested that brand name effect is the consumer's perception of the role that a brand name plays in how consumers form preferences (Jiang, 2004). Improved brand name awareness created through repetitive presentation of the brand name can facilitate access to subsequently advertised brand benefit claims (Heckler et al., 2014).

Although, to our knowledge, there have not been studies in marketing that looked at brand communication as a means to enhance organic knowledge, several food studies have shed some light on this issue. For example, Mueller and Szolnoki's (2010) study of the impact of extrinsic cues (e.g., branding, labeling, packaging) in the wine sector found that label style and brand evaluation were the strongest drivers for informed brand liking. Brown's (2003) study of pilchards and sardines concluded that brand

communication plays a central role in consumer appreciation of foods. The pilchard and the sardine are essentially the same fish, but the former has an image of sandwiches, while sardines offer images of the Mediterranean vocation. The company realized the brand/image potential of sardines and created a new market for their product; they now sell Cornish sardines in high-quality supermarkets throughout the UK. Other examples are Green & Black, which has communicated itself as an ethical brand, whereas Organic Valley has positioned itself as a co-operative brand that supports family farms (Datamonitor, 2004).

The literature reveals that consumers tend to have a very basic understanding of what organic food is. As Taylor–Nelson–Sofres's (2002) survey in the UK reported, about one third of respondents did not know how to correctly identify an organic product. This is because consumers are often unfamiliar with various organic labels (Padel & Foster, 2005). This suggests that relying on the use of the word *organic* may not be sustainable for both manufacturers (in the case of branded organic foods) and retailers (in the case of private-label organic foods) as organic foods are becoming increasingly commoditized in the marketplace. In their empirical study on the use of labeling information in purchasing organic and fair trade products, Annunziata, Iannario, and Pascale (2012) found that 43% of surveyed consumers consider the brand labeling of ethical products an important information tool; only in 7% of the cases do they state that they do not use labels at all. Despite this, those who use labels as sources for purchase decision-making stated they were not satisfied with the current level of information available to them. Therefore, our next proposition is as follows:

- P2: Brand communications will have a direct effect on consumer organic knowledge

Brand Communications and Consumer Trust

Organic food is credence good because consumers cannot immediately verify whether any of the benefits have been fulfilled, with the possible exception of taste (Perrini, Castaldo, Misani, & Tencati, 2010). Therefore, marketers should design brand communications that would boost consumer confidence and trust in organic food brands. When the information is partial or only partially credible, the resulting market will be smaller than the welfare-maximizing level it could achieve through providing fully credible information (Feddersen & Gilligan, 2001).

Marketing logic suggests that promotions would assist marketers in increasing brand utility and triggering short-term increase in sales (e.g., Blattberg, Brieschm, & Fox, 1995). However, this is not necessarily the case with organic food products, where sales promotions can have a negative impact on the choice of an organic brand and the number of units bought by consumers (see Ngobo, 2011). This suggests that consumers do

not necessarily expect organic food products to be on the same level of popularity with conventional foods. Although the organic food movement is now heading mainstream, marketers need to understand the risks associated with its growth and recognize that a small organic food sector may not be compatible with the economies of scale (Kaplan, 2008).

Previous studies show that consumer knowledge is often affected by mistrust of organic labeling practices (Padel & Foster, 2005; Lea & Worsley, 2005). Thus, a major challenge for organic food sellers is to make organic foods more accessible to consumers but also to maintain associations of organics as premium products in the marketplace. This can be achieved through well-defined brand communications as part of an overall branding strategy. The ability of brands to evoke feelings such as trust and confidence in consumers (Llorens, Puelles, & Martín-de la Cruz, 2011; Turley & Moore, 1995) indicates that brand communications should be strongly considered as valid and useful tools in building consumer trust. Therefore, our third proposition is as follows.

P3: Brand communications will have a direct effect on consumer trust

Brand Communications and Organic Purchases

In spite of the growing importance of marketing and brand communications in distinguishing organic labels and enhancing consumer purchases of organics, the link between the two remains to be researched. Prior studies focused mainly on identifying the profile of a typical “organic consumer” (Dettmann & Dimitri, 2009; Hughner, McDonald, Prothero, Schultz, & Stanton, 2007) or the role of consumer sociodemographic, health, and environmental concerns as motivators behind organic purchases (Doorn & Verhoef, 2011; Grunert & Juhl, 1995; Schifferstein & Oude Ophuis, 1998), but they did not consider the impact of brand communications on consumer responses. The existing research concerning the link between brand communications and organic purchases has been scarce, and the results are not consistent. For example, Ngobo’s (2011) study found that certain brand communications (e.g., sales promotions) unfavorably influence both the choice of organics and the amount purchased. On the other hand, Bezawada and Pauwels (2010) found that consumers are responsive to promotions of organic foods. This suggests that consumers, who are likely to purchase more sustainable products, respond less strongly to promotions (e.g., price promotions) compared to conventional consumers (Nierop, van Herpen, & Sloot, 2012).

In their experimental study on consumer intentions to buy organic foods, Nasution, Tarigan, and Dhewanto (2011) showed that certain elements of brand communications (e.g., corporate reputation and perceived product benefits) were important to consumer purchase intentions. The Larceneux, Benoit-Moreau, and Renaudin’s (2012) study confirmed a moderating effect of brand equity and organic labeling on consumer choices. Thus,

it is critical for marketers to understand the impact of different types of brand communications on consumer purchases and design organic unique selling propositions accordingly. Therefore, our next proposition postulates:

- P4: Brand communications will have a direct effect on consumer organic purchases

Consumer Knowledge and Organic Purchases

Consumer brand knowledge relates to the personal meaning of a brand and its descriptive and evaluative information (Keller, 2003, 2012). Consumers spend only a few seconds looking at food labels, and this time entails a rushed process of searching for information and analyzing and weighing it to make a decision (Clement et al., 2012). The situation is further complicated by the complexity of multiple information items on food labels (Fasolo, Carmeci, & Misuraca, 2009). Consumer knowledge is therefore viewed as critical because of its ability to influence and accelerate the consumer's decision-making process (Laroche, Bergeron, & Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). On the other hand, uncertainty about how to decode product information has been identified as a feature that impedes decision-making processes (Weber & Johnson, 2009).

Brand knowledge creates value for consumers in several ways. First, brand associations help consumers to process and retrieve information (Aaker, 1991; Tybout, Calder, & Sternthal, 1981), with anticipation of favorable effects as well as considerations of benefits that provide a specific reason to purchase (Henderson, Iacobucci, & Calder, 1998). Brands have a capacity to provide signals of tacit quality that might complement organic labels in terms of their effects on overall perceived product quality judgments (Larceneux et al., 2012). Second, because of such links to brand equity, preference, and, ultimately, a choice, it is crucial for marketing managers to understand how consumer knowledge affects their purchases of organic foods.

Previous research measured the impact of extrinsic attributes on consumer purchasing behaviors. Vazifehdust and Norouzi (2011) and Grace and O'Cass (2005) found that brand name influences customer satisfaction and brand reuse intentions. In Mueller and Szolnoki's (2010) study of wine, consumers evaluated several extrinsic elements of the offerings, including brand and packaging style, prior to indicating their liking and purchase intent. Smith and Paladino (2010) found that consumer product familiarity influences both consumer purchase intent and actual purchases.

Previous studies suggest that consumers are not always clear about the organic farming processes versus the conventional ones (see Hill & Lynchehaun, 2002) and the organic certification processes (see Lockie et al., 2004). Padel and Foster's (2005) study demonstrated that consumers tend to have limited knowledge of the inspection processes associated with organic

production. In addition, the qualitative research of participants responsible for food purchases in their families revealed that they would need to be better informed about the organic certification process (Makatouni, 2002). These studies imply that although consumers have a basic understanding of organics, they lack a full picture of its meaning and the processes associated with production of organic food. This highlights organic knowledge as an important variable to consider in relation to organic food purchases. Therefore, the next proposition of this study is

P5: Organic knowledge will have a direct effect on organic food purchases

Organic Knowledge and Consumer Trust

From a consumer-oriented perspective, the organic food label offers cues that generate brand associations and help consumer choices, assuming consumers understand and trust the label (Koos, 2011; Sønderskov & Daugbjerg, 2010). In the market of organic food, consumer trust is paramount not only because organic food is a relatively new phenomenon but also because it is difficult for consumers to verify if the product they purchase is truly organic. Inconsistent distribution of organic information between the supplier side and the consumer side in credence goods markets such as organic foods may be prone to the opportunistic behavior in the supply chain that can also trigger consumer mistrust (Darby & Karny, 1973; Meyer et al., 2012). This article proposes that one way of offsetting the information asymmetry and decreasing the risk of consumer mistrust is through enhancing consumer organic knowledge.

Successful communication of organic knowledge is contingent on trust in sources of information delivered to consumers (Kjaernes, 2006), which makes trust both a condition and outcome of communications (de Krom & Mol, 2010). The link between organic knowledge and consumer trust has not received much attention in the literature, and the existing findings have not been straightforward. Moorman, Deih, Brinberg, and Kidwell (2004) found that subjective knowledge influences consumer choices, as they are motivated to act in accordance to the knowledge they possess. De Krom and Mol's (2010) study of food risks shows that apart from knowledge inferred from information provision, trust depends as much on consumer strategies dealing with their low awareness of consumer food risks. On the other hand, Smith and Paladino (2010) did not find that personal awareness of a product favorably affects consumer predisposition toward organic products. In the study of consumer perceptions of organic labeling practices, Janssen and Hamm (2012) concluded that it is advisable for organic food sellers to label their organic products with well-known organic certification authorities that consumers trust. Therefore, our next proposition is as follows:

P6: Organic knowledge will have a direct effect on consumer trust

Consumer Trust and Organic Purchases

Trust has been defined as one party's expectations that the other party will keep the promises and fulfill relevant obligations (Dawyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Hagen & Choe, 1998). This definition implies that the party who trusts the other party is in a vulnerable position, because he or she is the one to whom the promises should be kept. Therefore, investigation of trust is more important in the areas such as organic food production where consumer-perceived control is diminished (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Furthermore, organic food providers face challenges to build consumer trust in several forms—namely, the retailer's private label, the private-label organic product, and, finally, organic products as a category (Perrini et al., 2010). Consumer marketing literature has argued that brands can reduce risks and engender consumer trust (Keller & Lehman, 2006; MacInnis, 2012). Brands regarded by consumers as competent but also capable of fulfilling affective consumer needs are more likely to develop strong brand attachments, and whether and to what extent such effects are mediated by brand trust is important (MacInnis, 2012).

The increasing availability of organic foods in mainstream supermarkets further creates a precedent for another credibility gap because consumers generally cannot check if the retailer or manufacturer accurately enforces organic standards (Perrini et al., 2010). Consumer uncertainties regarding organic standards can lead consumers to doubt sellers' claims that food is actually organic (e.g., Padel & Foster, 2005). Several studies found that consumers' skepticism and lack of trust prevented them from purchasing more organic food (Aertsens, Verbeke, Mondelaers, & Huylenbroeck, 2009; Lea & Worsley, 2005; Padel & Foster, 2005). On the other hand, consumer trust leads to feelings of warmth (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002) and brand loyalty and commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Singh & Sirdeshmukh, 2000). This implies that trust creates exchange relationships that can be highly valued. However, organic consumer trust has received insufficient attention in the marketing literature. Therefore, this article develops the next proposition and states that increased consumer trust would lead to organic purchases.

- P7: Consumer trust in organic foods will have a direct effect on consumer organic purchases

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Testing for both moderating and mediating effects is useful to studies focusing on consumer behavior (Hayes & Matthes, 2009; Shahriar, D'Ambra, & Ray, 2011). Based on the literature review, the proposed research framework puts forward three mediators—namely, brand communication, consumer trust, and organic knowledge—in the relationship between consumer-perceived

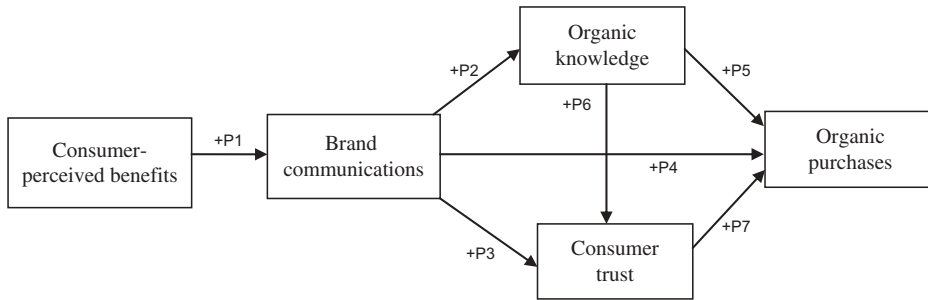


FIGURE 1 The research model.

value and consumer organic purchases. Mediation occurs when an independent variable influences the dependent variable through its effects on or as a result of a mediator variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). According to Baron and Kenny (1986), full mediation is strongest when there is an indirect effect but no direct effect between independent and dependent variables. If there are two mediators, they can be tested either simultaneously or separately (Kenny, 2011), provided that different mediators are conceptually distinct and not too highly correlated, which is the case in our conceptual model.

Several studies pointed to the importance of testing for mediation in communication and media research (Davidow, 2003; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002; Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). Kenny (2011) recommended testing for mediation in most causal or structural models because testing of these can reveal the most interesting results. Becker, van Rompay, Schifferstein, and Galetzka (2011) and McLeod and Reeves (1980) argued that by taking mediating effects into consideration, researchers recognize that mediators do not have that universal influence on consumers' attitudes. Thus the proposed model (Figure 1) has one direct causal effect between consumer benefits and brand communications. It also has four indirect causal effects between brand communications and organic purchases. The model proposes two other mediating constructs such as consumer trust and organic knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTICE AND STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION

The current study prompts a number of practical implications and recommendations for the organic food industry. This article identifies a gap between a high consumer awareness of organic food and a relatively low level of actual purchases. Analysis of literature reveals several factors that could explain this relationship presented in this study. First, the literature review reveals that relying on the word *organic* may no longer be sustainable for both manufacturers (in the case of branded organic foods) and retailers

(in the case of private-label organic foods) because organic products are becoming increasingly commoditized in the marketplace.

Providers of global, local, and private brands are advised to add the brand's characteristics for positioning and repositioning of organic brands. Branding strategies should be developed to assist retailers in the development of further product lines of organic foods. The link between organic labeling and the brand value of established products should be critically assessed to ensure they are not at odds with each other.

Second, the literature reveals that information about organic products in the marketplace is either limited or at times confusing for consumers. It is recommended that retailers and manufacturers design marketing programs to educate consumers about organic foods that will stimulate consumer intentions to purchase organics (e.g., in supermarkets and restaurants). One way that marketers can increase organic food consumption and enhance brand familiarity is through product trials. Marketing programs designed around educating consumers found support in Gracia and Magistris's (2008) study that contended that marketing efforts should be aimed at both new and existing organic buyers.

As organic foods are becoming more mainstream, the challenge for marketers is how to expand the commercial success of organics without compromising values and standards. Although it is important to make organic food more accessible to consumers, it is advisable that organic products retain the associations of relative exclusivity. This presents another challenge now to conventional "value for money" supermarkets as consumers often associate organic food products with specific stores. Previous research has shown that sales promotions negatively influence both the choice of an organic brand and the number of units purchased by consumers (Ngobo, 2011), suggesting that when consumer organic knowledge is limited or confusing, the use of sales and promotions may further increase the perceived risks (e.g., functional, physical, psychological) from buying that product. Therefore, sales promotions and price cuts are not necessarily the most effective marketing tools when it comes to increasing the number of organic consumers.

Finally, raising awareness of organics (e.g., labeling practices) should also assist marketers in reducing consumer confusion and enhancing consumer trust. To reduce consumer confusion among consumers, there is a need to provide consistent brand communication. In addition, organic labels should go beyond merely informing consumers about products and also communicate clear advantages that help to differentiate the brand from the competition and enhance brand equity.

Brand communication was previously found to have favorable effects on the development of a trust-based platform between consumers and brands. For example, findings from the Grace and O'Cass (2005) and Vazifehdust and Norouzi (2011) studies suggested that brand communications play a

pivotal role in establishing consumer expectations, thus influencing satisfaction and brand attitudes. Therefore, brand communications can be utilized to enhance organic knowledge, and brand names should reinforce consumer confidence, trust, and safety of usage.

Clearly, the intricacies of the process by which consumers evaluate differentiated products create a challenge for organic food branding. Marketers are recommended not to over-rely on consumer environmental concern in their marketing and brand communication efforts. The rationale behind consumer purchase of organics is more complex and often driven by hedonistic values. It is recommended that marketers learn more about consumer-perceived benefits of organic food and design their brand communications accordingly.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study contributes to marketing and branding literature in several ways. In an attempt to assist marketing practitioners with a better understanding of the gap between high awareness of organics and relatively low purchase volumes, this study develops a comprehensive research framework that considers brand communications along with consumer trust and organic knowledge as the factors that can explain such a gap. This article also recognizes that consumer-perceived value of organics needs to be further explored and integrated into brand communications. For instance, future researchers might want to investigate the relative importance of functional, symbolic, or affective/emotional components of consumer value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) within brand communications on consumer purchases of organics. The researchers might investigate different components of consumer knowledge, such as brand awareness and familiarity (Keller, 2012), on organic purchases. Finally, it is suggested that the key constructs and the proposed relationships should be further explored and compared across different types of organics.

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