Chapter 6
Images of Organic Food Products, Consumers, Makers, and Distributors:
An Image Congruence Study

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ABSTRACT

Compared to the other fields of business, research on image congruence in the food business sector, particularly organic food, is relatively scarce. Previous studies could only identify the congruence of certain psychological elements of perceived image. Other functional elements, on the other hand, are mostly overlooked. Considering these issues, this study aimed to examine customer perceptions of themselves as organic food consumers, of organic food products, and of organic food makers and distributors. Using data gathered from nine informants, this study found that organic food consumers held certain images concerning organic food products, their makers and distributors, and themselves. Some images of organic food consumers and organic food products shared the same nature. In addition, some images of organic food consumers, makers and distributors had the same essence. Implications of these findings, together with the limitations of this study and directions for future research, were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, organic food has become a new trend of consumption. Worldwide sales revenue of organic food was 167167.85 billion USD in 2020 (Report Linker, 2021). In the US alone, the revenue of this market might have reached 56.4 billion US dollars in 2020 (Statista, 2021). Organic food has transformed

itself into a mainstream sector in this country. Facilitating organic food purchases will even strengthen and expand this sector. Nevertheless, research on organic food seems to prefer a general and theoretical concept to real or existing products (Arumugam, Govindasamy, Vellangany, & Gohil, 2017; Konuk, 2018; Richetin, Mattavelli, & Perugini, 2016; Tandon, Dhir, Kaur, Kushwah, & Salo, 2020; Tandon, Jabeen, Talwar, Sakashita, & Dhir, 2021). In addition, research on customer perceptions of organic food makers or distributors or their perceived images is largely missing, although some studies examined both consumers' and makers' attitudes toward organic food consumption and production (McEachern & Willock, 2004; Storstad & Bjørkhaug, 2003), and several emphasized the origin of organic food products (Sirieix, Kledal, & Sulitang, 2011; Thøgersen, Pedersen, Paternoga, Schwendel, & Aschemann-Witze, 2017). In order to provide more practical implications for makers and distributors to improve the production and distribution processes of organic food, such a gap in the literature needs to be filled.

The consumption of organic food is facilitated by customers' perceived self-image and perceived product image (Gianluigi Guido, Peluso, Maloumby-Baka, & Buffa, 2010; Hwang, 2016; Soyez, Francis, & Smirnova, 2012; Sultan, Wong, & Sigala, 2018). The congruence between self-image and product image, in particular, and other types of image congruence (e.g., self-image vs. endorser image and endorser image vs. product image), in general, is essential with customers' purchase intentions toward and satisfaction with products and their providers (Pool, Khodadadi, & Asadi, 2018; Pradhan, Duraipandian, & Sethi, 2016; Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony, 2017), including food products (Chien, Wu, & Huang, 2018; de Droog, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2014; Septianto, Kemper, & Paramita, 2019). However, compared to the other fields of business, research on image congruence in the food business sector, in general, and organic food, in particular, is relatively scarce. In addition, by applying the structured methods (pre-determined scales), previous studies could only identify the congruence of certain psychological elements of perceived image, such as personality and gender (Beldad, Hegner, & Hoppen, 2016; Malodia, Singh, Goyal, & Sengupta, 2017; Pradhan, Duraipandian, & Sethi, 2016). On the other hand, other functional elements (e.g., quality and value) are mostly overlooked since each image bearer (e.g., customer, endorser, product, and brand) is attributed to different characteristics due to their specific natures. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding of the functional elements may cause difficulties in the projection and delivery of the psychological elements.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine customer perceptions of themselves as organic food consumers, organic food products, and organic food makers and distributors to fill in the gap concerning organic food and related stakeholders' images. In addition, adopting the image congruence approach, this study identifies the differences or similarities among these types of images to support future management and marketing practices involving organic food products. Nevertheless, unlike the majority of previous research, this study chooses a qualitative method to reveal the true and authentic perceptions of organic food customers and avoid the limitation of the conventional structured quantitative method. The US market is specifically selected as the context of the study, given that it already is an established market. Customer perception, thus, has been more solidly formed. The findings of this study will enrich the literature on image congruence and provide practical implications for organic food management and marketing.

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