Are health and nutrition claims influencing organic consumers?

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In recent years, both functional food and organic food products have become increasingly popular, not least due to the health benefits, or perceived health benefits, associated with them. Studies, however, have also shown that food carrying nutrition or health claims can sometimes be perceived as unnatural, especially if they have been altered to provide added nutrition or health benefit.

Researchers from Aarhus University (Denmark) and the University of Kassel (Germany) investigated how consumers of organic food react to a combination of organic and functional food, i.e. their attitudes towards and their buying behaviour of an organic product bearing a nutrition or health claim. While no significant difference was observed with regards to choosing a product with or without a claim, occasional buyers of organic food were more likely to choose an organic food product with a claim. Furthermore, opting for a product with a claim was associated with reading the claim and perceiving the product as healthier when compared to the other options available.

210 German consumers of organic food (19-75 years, two thirds women and one third men) participated in the study, with half of them classified as occasional and half as intensive organic food consumers. The study took place in a laboratory purchase simulation environment. Three different product categories (wheat spaghetti, strawberry fruit yoghurt, fruit muesli) from five different brands were used. In each choice set, two of the five organic products carried a claim – either a nutrition claim, a general health claim or a disease risk reduction health claim. Participants were given money and asked (but not obliged) to choose one product per category.

In face-to-face interviews following these food choice tasks, respondents were asked to evaluate the healthfulness of the food products offered and in what way they noticed the claims on some of the products. Further, general scepticism towards food labelling, attitudes towards functional food and buying behaviour of organic food was measured.

Results show that organic products carrying a nutrition or health claim were not significantly more or less frequently chosen than those without a claim. Those participants classified as intensive organic food consumers also did not differ in their food choice. However, occasional organic buyers were significantly more likely to choose a product bearing a claim (46% of all choices).

When comparing buying motives (health-related versus wanting to protect the environment), no differences in respondents’ food choices could be found. The same held true for shopping behaviour – whether participants typically shopped at conventional supermarkets or alternative organic stores, did not influence their food choices. However, assessing a product as equal or healthier than the average of the choice set and actually reading the claim on the product were found to be significant factors in explaining (part of) the choice of products carrying a claim. Additionally, those participants who were less sceptical towards food labelling and who thought that organic products were healthier when they carried a claim were also more likely to choose products with a claim.
The authors highlighted that overall noticing and reading of claims on products was very low and as such results from the small sub-group of respondents who did see and read the claim cannot be extrapolated to the German population, nor other countries populations.

Overall, this study does not provide any indication that organic food consumers are less likely to choose organic products with a nutrition or health claim. Occasional organic food consumers were more likely to choose organic products with a claim while intensive organic food consumers did not show any differences in their food choice. From this study, it does not appear that consumers disapprove of organic products when carrying a nutrition or health claim.

The authors, however, note that the small number of participants who noticed and read the claims on selected food products prevents from generalising the findings beyond this sample. Generally, few studies have been assessing consumers’ acceptance of combining organic products and functionally altered food. Further research is needed to explore this relationship as well as possible trade-offs that are made during food choice and buying decisions.

For further information see: