PERCEPTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE OF A SELECTED GROUP OF ORGANIC CONSUMERS IN BLOEMFONTEIN, FREE STATE PROVINCE

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Abstract

Organic agriculture is a production method that upholds the well-being of soil, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles tailored to local conditions. This descriptive study assessed the knowledge and perceptions of organic food consumers in Bloemfontein. A convenience sample of 60 consumers (male and female) was selected to participate in the study. A structured questionnaire was designed to obtain data at a local fresh-produce grocer. Most of the consumers showed positive and negative attitudes towards organic products. Most consumers had basic knowledge regarding organic products, but it also became evident that there was uncertainty surrounding facts of organic products, such as labelling standards. Only 12% of respondents interpreted the term “organic” correctly. Human health (86.67%) and environmental concerns (28.33%) were the key factors influencing consumer preference for organic food. Organic fruit and vegetables (45.37%) were the most popular purchased organic items amongst consumers. The majority of consumers (61.67%) stated that organic products are affordable. The results of the present study provided valuable insight into the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of consumers towards organically grown foods. The general positive attitude of consumers can be attributed to consumers' basic knowledge of, and preference for, organic food. Despite the organic lifestyle being in the minority in this region, there continues to be a growing demand for organic products in Bloemfontein, and for this reason producers have ensured a continued supply of organic products.

Keywords: organic consumers, perceptions, ecosystems, biodiversity

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2006, certified organic sales achieved an estimated excess of 30 billion Euros, a 20% increase from 2005 (UNEP-UNCTAD, 2008:2). Since the launch of organic products, they have been targeted towards a niche market, which is the upper-middle class of society (Kisaka-Lwayo & Obi, 2011:20). Approximately one third of this market purchases organic and free-range products (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2010:2).Organic foods are perceived in many ways, but mainstream society perceives organic products as beneficial to one's health (Pirog & Larson, 2007:21). Along with the population perceiving organic products as healthy, they also perceive organic foods as costly (Kisaka-Lwayo & Obi, 2011:12).

Society's perception that organic foods are healthy influences their purchasing habits (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2010:2). With health being experienced as diminishing in humans, buyers see the purchase of organic products as an investment in their health (Bonti-Ankomah, Martin & Yiridoe, 2005:iii). Many consumers also believe organic foods are better tasting than conventional food products (Engel, 2008:6). Organic products originated in European countries in the 1840s. The industrial agricultural food production delivered negative results, and the public were looking to return to a more natural way of food production. From there the trend spread to neighbouring and developing countries (Engel, 2008:11). According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), organic agriculture is "a production method that upholds the well-being of soil, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles tailored to local conditions, rather than use inputs with unfavourable consequences" (Ozgen, 2012:242).

Organic foods are perceived as safer, because they have been associated with little or no chemical residues. This standing can be challenged, as these foods have the potential to be contaminated either during their processing or transportation to the location of sale (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2005:16). Therefore, consumers need to be aware that the mere fact that a product is said to be 'organic' does not necessarily mean that it is 'safe' (Magkos, Arvaniti & Zampelas, 2006:23). Awareness of organic products by consumers is key in developing a demand for them; however, awareness is not necessarily linked to consumption. Consumption necessitates an obligation from consumers; this necessity is influenced by pricing and quality (Briz & Ward, 2009:296). Organic products are priced higher than their conventional alternatives, but generate a smaller harvest. The lower yield of organic products is counterbalanced by the higher price at which they are sold (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2005:13). However, with the popularity of organic products increasing, prices will soon be very similar to those of conventional products (McIver, 2004:58).

Marketing managers should therefore direct their marketing campaign towards highlighting the benefits of organic foods, rather than focusing on the negative awareness surrounding the cost of these products (Raab & Grobe, 2005:4). Organic products include nuts, flours, cereals, chocolate, ice cream, beers and wines. In addition, non-food products, such as aromatherapy essential oils and cosmetics, are being produced organically too (Opinion Research, 1990). Organic fish has received very little attention. By and large, fish farms are used much less frequently than wild, capture fisheries; therefore, there is less publicity about organic fish (Aarset, Beckmann, Bigne, Beveridge, Bjorndal, Bunting, McDonagh, Mariojouls, Muir, Prothero, Reisch, Smith, Tveteras & Young, 2004:95).

While several studies and surveys have been conducted on the subject of organic foods, the researchers gauged consumers' knowledge and perceptions of organic food demands in the city of Bloemfontein.

These consumers were targeted to enable the researchers to establish the attributes of prospective organic consumers. The objective of the study is to determine the perceptions and knowledge of consumers about organic food products at a selected food grocer in Bloemfontein.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010:182) was conducted at a local fresh-produce grocer selling a variety of organic produce to determine consumers' knowledge and perceptions about organic products. This grocer attracts many Bloemfontein residents who are in search of fresh, local produce. A convenience sample of 60 Bloemfontein consumers (male and female) was included in the study. The researchers spent one day at the local grocer, where consumers were approached to complete a structured three-minute questionnaire. Oral consent was received from the respondents prior to completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire used was modified from a questionnaire used in a similar study. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions. Five questions dealt with the consumers' demographic background, and eleven questions tested their perceptions and knowledge of organic food products. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all responses. Verbal consent was obtained from the owner of the grocer in June 2013.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the knowledge and perceptions of organic food consumers in Bloemfontein. Table 1 illustrates the demographic profile of the respondents. Sixty male and female subjects agreed to form part of the study.
Table 1: Demographic profile of organic food consumers (N=60)

Question	Respondents N = 60	Total %100
GENDER:		
Male	24	40
Female	36	60
LANGUAGE:		
Afrikaans	45	75
English	6	10
Sesotho	7	11.67
Xhosa	1	1.67
Portugese	1	1.67
RESIDENTS:		
Bloemfontein	54	90
Other city/town	6	10

OCCUPATION:		
Business, commerce and finance	9	15
Self-employed / entrepreneur	10	16.67
Education	0	0
Science and medicine	3	5
Engineering and technology	2	3.33
Legal	0	0
Sports and recreation	1	1.67
Pensioner	3	5
Government	4	6.67
Retail, tourism and hospitality	19	31.67
Student / scholar	6	10
Other	3	5
MARITAL STATUS:		
Single	20	33.33
Married	31	51.67
Life partner	3	5
Divorced	2	3.33
Widowed	4	6.67

Of all the participants, 60% were female (n=36) and 40% were male (n=24). This makes it clear that females are the primary food shoppers in the household. The dominant group (75%) were Afrikaans-speaking consumers, and 90% of them resided in Bloemfontein. Roughly a third of middle- and upper-income consumers prefer purchasing organic and free-range produce (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2010:2). This corresponds with our results, which show that the top three categories of occupation of our respondents are retail, tourism and hospitality (31.67%); business, commerce and finance (15%); and self-employed/entrepreneur (16.67%).

Of all the participants, 33.33% were single; 6.67% were widowed; and 3.33% were divorced, perhaps indicating that these groups choose to buy organic produce merely because they do not have to provide for a whole family. The majority of the participants, however, were married (51.67%), possibly demonstrating that consumers are moving more predominantly towards purchasing organic food produce for their families, as they are becoming more aware on the benefits of organic products (Kisaka-Lwayo & Obi, 2011:10).

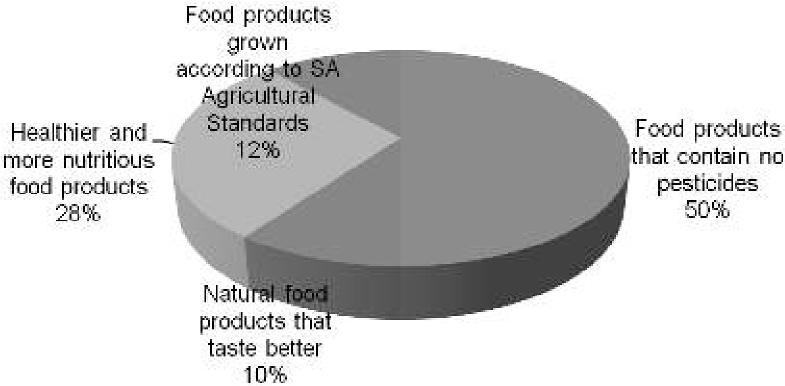

Figure1: Consumers' definitions of "organic" produce

Although there is some knowledge and awareness about organic products, consumers are not consistent in their interpretation of what organic is (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2005:16). Figure 1 shows that 50% of the respondents perceive organic foods to be foods containing no pesticides.

Only 12% of respondents interpreted organic food to be grown according to South Afican Agricultural Standards. It is in accordance with these standards, as set out by the South African Department of Agriculture's organic standards (FACS Scientific Director 2003:Online), that organic products are grown and processed in keeping with a specific method used by the farmers,in which they grow produce without the use of conventional pesticides, artificial fertilisers, human waste or sewage deposits. Livestock are nurtured without the use of antibiotics or growth hormones. Of the other participants to this study, 28% perceived organic food to be healthier and more nutritious, and 10% of participants alleged that organic food taste better. Generally, consumers understand the broad environmental issues that organic practices are associated with; however, many of them do not comprehend the intricacy of organic farming practices and organic food quality characteristics.

Table2: Organic food purchase habits of the respondents

Question	Respondents N = 60	Total %100
FREQUENCY OF ORGANIC FOOD PURCHASING:		
Sometimes/from time to time	44	73.33
Regularly	12	20
Always	4	6.67

WHAT TYPES OF ORGANIC FOOD PRODUCTS ARE PURCHASED:		
Dairy	18	16.67
Fruit & vegetables	49	45.37
Meat	16	14.81
Starch	5	4.63
Fats &oils	10	9.26
Other dry ingredients/spices/coffee & tea	10	9.26
MAIN REASON FOR BUYING ORGANIC PRODUCTS:		
Health	52	86.67
Environmental concern	17	28.33
Price	5	8.33
Availability	5	8.33
Fashionable	5	8.33
Other	0	0
PURCHASING HISTORY:		
1-3 Months	16	26.67
4-6 Months	2	3.33
7-9 Months	3	5
10-12 Months	7	11.67
12 Months & bnger	32	60

The frequency of organic purchases varied from 73.33% of consumers sometimes buying organic produce; 20% buying organic produce regularly; and a mere 6.67% of consumers admit to always opting to buy organic products (Table 2).

Participants could select more than one option when it came to specifying which organic products they chose to purchase. Organic fruit and vegetables were purchased most often, as 45.37% of the participants indicated. The second most popular organic product that consumers purchased was dairy products (16.67%), closely followed by meat (14.81%); fats and oils (9.26%); other dry ingredients (9.26%); and only 4.63% of respondents purchased organic starch products. As there is an increased concern about human health and safety, this is becoming a key factor in the purchasing of organic produce by consumers. They see this as an investment in their health and well-being (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2005:iii).

In the current study, it is evident that health (86.67%) was a major influencing factor for respondents purchasing organic foods, followed by environmental concern (28.33%).The majority (60%) of consumers have been purchasing organic produce for longer than a year; 26.67% of respondents have only recently started purchasing organic products (1-3 months); and 11.67% of participants have been purchasing organic products for just short of a year.

Table 3: Organic food product issues of respondents

Question	**Respondents** N = 60	**Total** %100
ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: **Are organic food practices safer for the environment?**		
Yes	57	95
No	3	5
NUTRITIONAL ISSUES: **Organic food adds?**		
Greater nutritional value	40	66.67
Moderate nutritional value	18	30
No additional nutritional value	2	3.33
PRICE ISSUES: **Organic foods are?**		
Overpriced	22	36.67
Affordable	37	61.67
Cheap	1	1.67
AVAILABILITY ISSUES: **Organic foods are?**		
Freely available	12	20
Available from time to time	37	61.67
Difficult to find in stores	11	18.33
LABELLING ISSUES: **Are organic labels reliable and trustworthy?**		
Yes	30	50
Not sure	23	38.33
No	7	11.67
FASHION ISSUES: **Organic food is?**		
A reality	45	75
A fashion statement	15	25

Is it visible from the respondents' responses that they feel organic practices are safer for the environment (95%) as well as two thirds of consumers being convinced that organic produce is of greater nutritional value than conventional food products. Although in the past organically grown food has always been more steeply priced than conventional foods, this perception is changing as more organically grown foods are becoming available on the market. As the findings in Table 3 show, 61.67% of respondents perceive organic foods to be affordable. This corresponds with the theory that the larger the organic market grows, the more affordable the organic produce will become (Oberholtzer & Dimitri, 2005:3). Consequently, the larger the organic market and the more affordable the organic produce, so, too, the availability of organic products will increase, as the majority (61.67%) of respondents agreed that organic products are only available from time to time.

There is much uncertainty regarding the labelling of organic products, part of which is due to mislabeling and product misrepresentation in the past (Giannakas, 2002:37). This, too, has been highlighted in the current study, as 38.33% of respondents were unsure whether organic labels were reliable and trustworthy. Preference for purchasing organic products is based on the general perception that these products offer more desirable characteristics than their conventionally grown counterparts (Bonti-Ankomah et al., 2005:8). Of the respondents in this study, 75% were of the opinion that organics have become a reality that should be taken seriously in our daily lives. Only 25% thought of organics as being merely a fashion statement. Bloemfontein has a small population of organic product users. The variety of organic produce grocers is limited, which makes it difficult to find possible participants for a study such as this.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Organic food products are receiving significant attention in the food industry. The growing interest in this topic has prompted several studies in which conventional food products are compared to organic food products. The results of the present study have provided valuable insight into the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of Bloemfontein consumers towards organically grown products.

The overall positive attitudes of respondents could be linked to increased basic knowledge and a preference for organic products. Environmental concern and nutritional value were perceived as advantages of organic products, while the availability and trustworthiness of organic labels were observed as disadvantages of organic products. A basic understanding seems to be evident by consumers who understand the meaning of the term “organic”. However, sufficient knowledge of aspects of organics such as labelling still seems to be insufficient. Despite the organic lifestyle rising slowly in popularity in Bloemfontein and being in the minority, there continues to be a growing demand for organic products in Bloemfontein.

For this reason, producers have ensured a continued supply of organic products to this region. Future studies on this topic could include using two demographically diverse neighbourhoods in Bloemfontein and comparing their knowledge and perceptions of organic food products.

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