

Communication needs of consumers regarding trust in organic food

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Abstract - This paper addresses the question of how information influences the perception and trust of consumers in organic food. Focus groups were conducted to identify what type of information persuades consumers and whether and how it can impact trust. The information and communication channels already in use by retailers were obtained through expert interviews. It turns out that retailers underestimate consumers' need for information and, in particular, do not yet exploit the potential of QR codes.

INTRODUCTION

Organic food is characterized by credence qualities (Darby and Karni, 1973). Thus, it is not possible for consumers to check whether these foods were actually produced organically. Different studies show that trust is a decisive factor for consumers to make a positive purchase decision in favour of organic food (e. g. Sobhanifard, 2017). However, consumers often do not trust organic products. Among other reasons, doubts about organic production or certification and a lack of knowledge about the meaning of organic labels (e. g. Kushwah et al., 2019) or generally about organic agriculture hinder trust building. To overcome these purchase barriers, providing information about and establishing transparency in regard to organic production could play a critical role (e. g. Tang and Wang, 2013). However, it is a challenge to build up a communication strategy as the need for and perception of information differs widely between individuals (Vega-Zamora et al., 2019). Moreover, an information overload has to be avoided (Terlau and Hirsch, 2015). Therefore, on the one hand, the objective of this paper is to find out whether information can influence the perception of and trust in organic food. On the other hand, it is to be determined which information and communication channels organic retailers are already using. The overall objective is to provide recommendations for action to optimize consumer communication.

METHODS

The consumer perspective was obtained through ten guided focus groups. One goal of focus groups may be to gather information or explore opinions and attitudes (Lamnek, 2010). The focus groups were conducted in February 2021 with six participants each from Göttingen (rural area) and Duisburg (urban area) in an online format. It was discussed which aspects increase or decrease consumers trust and which trust expectations the participants have. One focus was also on information and communication possibilities. For this purpose, some information was given by the moderator after half of the discussion time. The participants were told what organic food is,

that legal requirements for production and processing exist and that the food is controlled and certified, and the basics of organic farming were explained. In a first step, the participants were asked whether some of the information was new to them and what information was convincing. In a second step, the participants were asked how the information influenced their perception of and trust in organic food and how this knowledge should be communicated.

To find out which information is currently provided by organic retail traders expert interviews were conducted in February and March 2020 in different organic shopping locations (e. g. organic stores and supermarkets or organic butchers). The interviews were conducted with the persons in the company responsible for marketing.

Both the focus groups and the expert interviews were recorded and analysed using qualitative content analysis.

RESULTS

Although, to some participants none of this information was new, others mentioned very different aspects. In particular, the preservation of diversity as a goal of organic farming or details on animal-friendly husbandry were convincing most.

This information does not lead to a change in the perception of organic food for all the discussants. Among other things, this is due to the fact that the information corresponds to the pre-existing expectations of some participants. In terms of trust, opinions are also mixed as to whether (this) information helps to strengthen trust. For some, however, it can, while others want even more information. The trust of well-informed consumers can be strengthened by information as this confirms their already existing knowledge. Non-informed consumers need information first in order to even be able to trust.

Many different ideas were discussed on how the information should be conveyed, but online-based information options (especially QR codes, but also links to homepages on product packages) as well as information in the shopping places are desired most.

Expert interviews revealed that information at the point of sale need to be brief and rather in a headline modus. Complex information about e. g. principles of organic farming are not grasped during shopping. Moreover, the experts expressed doubts about the extent to which consumers are at all interested in such details. Nevertheless, some retailers established various communication channels, such as mail distribution lists, a well-designed homepage or social media accounts to provide information for interested customers. At the time of the interviews (2020) QR

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Codes were not assessed as a practical communication tool. However, this view might have changed as QR codes became very popular during the Corona pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Consumers express a need for information, especially about the aspects they cannot verify themselves, such as organic animal husbandry and thus also organic production.

Regarding trust, the need for information confirms the findings of Kushwah et al. (2019), as consumers mainly have doubts regarding organic production, the meaning of organic labels, and are also partly unaware of what "organic" even means. They ask for information that presents complex interrelationships, circular economy and biodiversity. This presents a challenge for communication as there should be no overload either (Terlau and Hirsch, 2015). Therefore, information in shopping places should be focused on the most important things. Consumers can obtain further information through online-based information options. A mix of communication channels should be used to communicate the positive attributes of organic food (Sultan et al., 2020). However, even if these are perceived by consumers and improve their attitude towards organic food, this does not automatically result into trust. Meijboom et al. (2006) argue that trustworthiness of the food sector is a relevant precondition for trust. This is supported by Thorsøe (2015) who discusses the role of credibility of the food sector in regard to trust. Both conclude that information and transparency are important aspects in gaining consumers trust, however, communicating values and exploring the motivation of actors in the organic sector might be even more important.

Critically, however, it must be considered that this is not a representative study due to the low number of participants. In addition, regarding focus groups, it cannot be ruled out that the participants gave socially desirable answers.

CONCLUSION

In terms of content, the organic industry and organic trade should focus primarily on communicating the special features of organic farming and organic animal husbandry. This includes the process of organic production but also the other goals like the preservation of diversity. Particularly convincing were the goal of maintaining diversity, the information on circular economy and animal husbandry. Furthermore, the meaning of the labels must be communicated. Online-based communication options should be used for this – with QR codes being particularly attractive – and information directly in the shopping places, e. g. through signs/boards next to the organic food, flyers or even videos. Overall, a variety of communication channels must be used to reach as many consumers as possible. The organic sector and organic retailers should align themselves with consumer wishes to strengthen not only consumer trust but also sales.

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