Students’ Taste for Organic Food: A Look Into Influences of Organic Food

Amy Beaudruait, Human and Community Resource Development, The Ohio State University

Abstract

Organic farming became one of the fastest growing sectors of U.S. agriculture during the 1990s (USDA Economic Research, 2003). The aim of this study was to explore and describe what influenced college students’ perceptions of organic foods. More specifically, we examined students’ gender, age, race, and price of organic food influence students’ perceptions; to describe whether selected groups influence student’s perceptions; to describe how students perceive selected groups’ perceptions of organic food; and to determine whether there is a gender difference among students’ gender, college major, and child rear location description to possible influences of organic foods. The method was an ethnographic study. A descriptive qualitative research method was used to study the perceptions of undergraduate students enrolled in a Contemporary Issues class during Fall Quarter 2008 within the College of Food, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (FAES) at The Ohio State University.

For selected groups, respondents’ families had the most influence on students’ perceptions of organic foods; however, students viewed the selected groups as having positive perceptions of organic foods, except for politicians. For this population, television news affects perceptions more than newspapers. No significant differences were found with gender, child rear location, and college to possible influences of organic food perceptions.

Introduction

Consumption levels of organic food helped the U.S. organic food industry reach $10.9 billion in consumer sales in 2009, according to the Organic Trade Association’s 2004 Manufacturers Survey. The survey also found that the organic food market grew at an estimated 17% to 21% each year since 1997, while the entire food market grew from 2.9% to 4.4% per year during the same time period. A surprising result reported from the same survey was organic meat, poultry, and fish represented a mere 1% of organic sales, but increased by 78% during 2000s. Fruits and vegetables remained the largest category in 2003, accounting for 40% of sales (USDA Economic Research Service, 2005). In a demonstration of just how quickly the organic food phenomenon caught on, independent studies revealed that organic sales for U.S. organic food production was not part of the Census of Agriculture until 2002. The number of organic farmers or organic demand changes in the United States is impossible to approximate since data to date are so scattered and inconsistent. The National Organic Standards Board (2005, p. 26) defined “organic” as:

Organic agriculture is an ecological production management system that encompasses and promotes biodiversity, ecological cycles and biological diversity. It is based on minimal use of artificial and synthetic inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and growth-regulating substances that restore, maintain and enhance ecological harmony.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the accessible population’s perception influences of organic food. The results of this study provided a basis for understanding the perceptions and influences of the accessible population that can be used in lobbying, marketing, and education. Since upper class college students are relatively new consumers in the grocery market, it is essential to know what influences their perceptions of organic foods is important. Also, labeling of organic foods is a current topic in public opinion and legislation.

Research Objectives

1. To describe the demographic in which labels, brands, and prices of organic food influence students’ perceptions of organic food.
2. To describe how students perceive the selected groups’ perceptions of organic food.
3. To describe the degree of influence to which selected groups have on the students’ perceptions of organic food.
4. To describe the degree of influence that media has on their perceptions of organic food.
5. To determine if there is a significant difference between gender and their perception influences of organic food.
6. To determine if there is a significant difference between college major and their perception influences of organic food.
7. To determine if there is a significant difference among childhood rearing location description (rural, suburban, or urban) to their perception influences of organic food.

Research Design

The study focused on an accessible population of OSU undergraduates in FAES class entitled Contemporary Issues. Contemporary Issues (597 series) is a class offered to, and in some programs required, of all undergraduate OSU students. The questionnaire concentrated on the subjective influences on their perceptions pertaining to labels, brands, and prices of organic food and the influences of selected groups and the media on the students’ perceptions. Part of the study will also be comparative. The comparison among groups’ characteristics identifies whether the student’s gender or college major has a significant effect on the perception of organic foods. Also, whether the students’ childhood rearing location related to their influences’ perceptions. The demographic portion of the survey collected data is used to assess the comparison objectives.

Subject Selection

FAES students have a choice to complete one 597 course as a junior or senior in the following departments within the FAES College: Agricultural, Environmental & Development Economics, Animal Sciences, Food, Agricultural and Biological Engineering, Food Science and Technology, Horticulture and Crop Science, Human and Community Resource Development, and Plant Health Management. Three classes were selected for Autumn Quarter 2008. These classes were Problems and Policies in World Population, Food, and Environment; Issues Concerning Use of Artificial Animal Products by Humankind; and, Pesticides, Alternatives, and the Environment.

Instrument

The questionnaire included 38 items with perceptions being measured on a 5-point Likert scale of varying degrees of agree/disagree. The sections of the questionnaire included: Organic Food Purchasing Decisions, Perceptions and Public Opinion, Media and Organic Food Perceptions, and Demographics.

Content Validity and Reliability

To assure the content validity of the questionnaire, seven experts reviewed the questionnaire – two experts in methodology and five experts in organic food. A copy of the final questionnaire was pilot-tested to be considered valid. After the questionnaire’s expert review established validity, the questionnaire was pilot-tested during Spring Quarter 2006 in a FAES 597 Animal Science course that had 24 students. The reliability coefficient for the pilot-test was .83.

Condition of Testing

The questionnaires were distributed during the first or last 15 minutes of classes. Instructions and the IRB research consent script were provided on the cover page.

Data Analysis

To determine each respondent’s influences of perceptions, the answers from each item were tabulated. The instrument and responses were coded and entered into a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2004) database for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics described the accessible population.

For Objectives 5, 6, and 7 of this study, whether there was a significant difference with the characteristics of gender, college major, and childhood rearing description were verified with the chi-square statistic if the accessible population’s influences of organic food perceptions. A One-Way ANOVA was used for statistical comparisons to identify the existence of significant differences. An alpha level of .05 was used.

Results

Student enrollment during the second week of Autumn Quarter totaled 207 students (N=207) in the classes studied. Questionnaires were distributed during class time to all students and collected after the class. Total response was 185 students (91%). Nine OSU colleges and 54 majors were represented. The raw data were compiled of 10% more males than females in the classes. Although 39% of the population responded that they were raised in a rural location, only 25% responded that they lived at a farm.

Nine OSU Colleges with 54 majors were represented with the following ratios: Arts (2%), Biological Sciences (1%), Humanities (10%); Business (11%); Education (10%); Engineering; Food Science and Technology (23%); Engineering; Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences (3%); and Continuing Education (1%). For the purposes of this study, the Colleges were combined into two groups (A and B). The researcher referred to Group A as soft sciences, which are Colleges with an emphasis on social sciences or the arts, including Business. Group B was categorized as hard sciences, which focus on areas that are objective aspects of nature.

Methods

Overall Results

Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Perceived Influence of Organic Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>5</td>
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Child Rearing Location Description

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Location Description</th>
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<th>Perceived Influence of Organic Food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.2</td>
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</table>

Did You Ever Live on a Farm?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Students’ Enrollment in Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>Soft Sciences (A) 55.9 Hard Sciences (B) 40.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations

Organic Food Advertisements

Advertising in college magazines and college television programming for adults ages 18-24. The use of a celebrity spokesperson would not be recommended for any organic food advertising. Polls showed more consumers perceived organic food to be healthier and safer but, if used, should be advertised in or as representation of special interest groups. Results indicated that advertisements should be family or friends based because those selected groups influenced students’ perceptions the most.

Many advertising campaigns that use celebrity spokespersons – like Goli Milk, which emphasizes milk consumption and features a celebrity wear a suit and milk mustache in the print campaign – have been memorable and successful. However, the study’s research concluded that celebrities do not have more influence with this population’s organic food perceptions. Therefore, the use of a celebrity spokesperson would not be recommended for any organic food advertising.

Media

Newspaper and television news results indicated that news stories should be used more specifically to television. Since child rear location description had no significant difference with students’ perceptions and influence of organic food, advertising should be spread across geographic locations. However, industries should research and be aware of accessibility to products before advertising in certain locations. Also, media in suburban, and urban areas should produce stories on organic food.

Extension

For educational purposes, extension educators should offer materials on organic foods. Since family, friends, and green-minded nonprofits influenced students’ perceptions, intuitively, extension educators would influence as well. Extension educators also have the capability to educate about current organic food research and to inform community members of legislation regarding labels. Although this study has influence, organic food stories are often buried in newspapers and do not receive much attention. As a result from this study indicated, students do not search for stories about organic food.

Discussion

Further Research

1. Study one specific commodity instead of organic food as a commodity unit.
2. Explore and describe students’ perceptions of organic food.
3. Whether students perceive organic food to be healthier or safer is viewed as misleading information not yet been explored are whether students perceive the taste of organic food to be different and if the satisfaction of buying locally grown food is a positive influence of purchasing organic food.
4. Inclusion of Internet effects as influence of perceptions.
5. Exploration of buying habits of organic foods.
6. Universality across the United States – including Yale University, which is at the forefront – are offering students more organic food choices in dining halls. Research on this change in dining habits is affecting students’ dietary choices and course enrollment choices can be further studied.

Conclusion

Understanding influences of perception is important in all industries. Researchers must ask the question of: why do individuals think the way they do? Knowing why an idea, concept, or statement can be used in all realms of society, especially with regard to public policy and governmental issues.

By identifying factors influencing the increase in organic food sales, researchers are exploring the impact of influence. Influence plays a part in sales and organic food is a topic that draws double on both sides of the issue. On one hand, many believe the more production of food the better, while others believe that higher rates are not worth the cost to consumers. Knowing how knowledge at can be used in all realms of society, especially with regard to public policy and governmental issues.