

How Organic Consumption is used as a Consumption Pattern Expressing Status

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Background

As a key area receiving current scholarly attention, sustainable consumption has been studied from a range of perspectives: economic, sociological and environmental (Seyfang, 2006). The key to sustainable consumption is environmental preservation which can be achieved through consumer demand for green and environmentally friendly products which refer as green consumption (Black & Cherrier, 2010). This demand today is matched with environmentally friendly choices such as organic and locally grown fruit and vegetables, recycled paper, alternative formulations of detergents, eco-friendly magazines or low-energy light bulbs (Black & Cherrier, 2010). The global organic food market has grown extraordinarily. It has increased considerably in recent years and considered as one of the biggest growth markets in the food industry (Hughner et al., 2007). Same trend is visible in Sri Lanka today. Rosairo (2006) states that in Sri Lanka popularity and demand for organic vegetables is increasing rapidly which denote the rising popularity of organic food in Sri Lanka.

Research Problem

Elliott (2013) states that social status has blossomed as an important element in recent studies of green consumption. However, a study of literature reveals that Bourdieusian theory of status consumption has been spoken in relation to green consumption on a surface (e.g. Elliott, 2013) level and work by Griskevicius, Tybur, and Bergh (2010), depicts that although Veblenian elements are highlighted in explaining green consumption and status intentions of consumers, there is minimum reference to the theory which has not been used to explain this scenario in detail. Within green consumption organic consumption as a form of status has not been studied at all; thus this highlights a clear theoretical gap. Elliott (2013) states that the extent to which green products are status symbol depends on context, history and background. In the Sri Lankan context neither green nor organic within green has been studied in relation to status. Thus this is an empirical gap. Sri Lankan consumers' consumption patterns are linked to creating ones identity and status in society (Liyanage, 2003; Samarasinghe et al., 2014; Somatunga et al, 2014), thus status fits Sri Lankan context. This leads to the below research problem.

“How does the Sri Lankan consumer engage in organic consumption as a form of status consumption?”

Objectives

Identify the meaning given to organic food by the Sri Lankan consumer.

Identify how the consumers construct the reasons behind organic consumption

Understand how organic consumption is assigned the meaning of a status symbol by consumers and thereby use it as a form of status expression.

Theoretical Underpinnings & Scope

Bourdieu (1984) states how cultural capital, taste and habitus bring distinction thereby status. That is how individual habitus shapes taste for organic food, defines an individual's cultural capital and distinguishes them from rest of the society. Further Veblen ([1899]1994) speaks of conspicuous consumption which relates to status. Organic consumption is viewed within Veblen's conspicuous consumption framework where consumption choices are to showcase wealth, build networks and match consumption choices of peer group. Further empirically the study is narrowed down to individual consumers purchasing organic products within the Western province.

Methodology

Taking into consideration the purpose of the research, this study takes a social constructivism stance. Hence the researcher conducted the study in the qualitative approach thus interviews and observation were the data collection mechanism. The samples were selected purposively with respondents who are rich in information (Flick, 2007). Twenty organic food consumers and four vendors in the Western province was selected, the sample decision was until no further information was received. Data analysis followed was thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This included transcription, reading and familiarization; coding, searching for corresponding themes, reviewing themes and finally defining and naming them ready for the analysis write-up. Braun and Clarke (2013) state that these stages can be done either on hard copy, electronically using a computer program or Microsoft word together with the comment feature. The data analysis stage was carried out with a combination of both manual and Microsoft Word. Firstly interviews were transcribed and familiarized by reading through while taking notes referring to the content of the field note book. Then coding was carried out, these codes included as comments in each transcribed Microsoft word document. Hundred and fourteen such codes were identified. Once coded in Excel workbooks one tab was used for a single code and corresponding phrases mapping the code was copied to a single tab that represent the respective code. Using codes researcher created themes and then identified relationships between themes in order to produce the overall story. Corresponding codes were grouped together and put in a table, where one column included codes and the corresponding other column included the theme. These themes were re-looked at to relate to a more central theme, where themes identified were clubbed into a broader theme making the initial theme a sub theme (Refer table 1 below). This was a trial-and-error process where themes got changed on the regular basis. The entire process was re-visited to ensure appropriate themes are derived. After following this process main themes and sub themes that captured the most salient patterns in relation to answering the research objectives were used in explicating findings.

Table 1: Themes and Overarching Themes

Themes	Overarching themes
Organic definition via product perspective	Definition of organic consumption
Organic defined via customer usage	
Organic definition via environment perspective	
Achieve desired healthy consumption pattern through imitation	Distinction through health focus lifestyle via organic consumption
Inward focus	
Achieve desired healthy consumption pattern through knowledge	
Consumer knowledge on effect organic produce creates on nature a real differentiator	Consumer green image via organic, a differentiator of self - Responsible citizen
Differentiation through care for the environment	
Organic production enforces sustainable living	
Organic gives external beauty and confidence	Differentiation through beautifying body through organic food
Organic gives unique look	
Organic prevents ageing process	
Associations to a desirable way of living	organic consumption a life style that differentiates individuals
Organic a fad today	
Organic is something trendy	
Create identity	Organic established as a brand associated with today's self-oriented unique consumer
Creates acceptance in society	Organic Way forward for a youthful culture
Organic process is exciting and entertaining	Food is entertainment
Accessibility	Unique consumption knowledge

Circle of associations	
Related job	
Organic a family driven consumption choice	
Organic associated with wealth	Organic showcase consumers financial strength
Lookup to this category to maintain standard	Organic defines individual status
Quality of life	
Organic used to maintain status in society	
Organic consumption is associated with the affluent crowd	
Differentiation through individual dimensions	
Imitate to match the rest	Organic as a status seeking consumption pattern
Positive self reflections	
Organic as a consumption choice to meet/seek peer status	
	Organic as a tool to distinguish individuals
Passionate consumer	Consumer roles
Conscious consumer	
Super consumer	

Key Findings

Previous research states that organic is interpreted in a variety of ways by different consumers: it is said that organic is often associated with terms like ecological, green, natural and sustainable (Aarset et al., 2004). Similarly the study revealed that the Sri Lankan consumer gives different meanings to organic. In relation to the first research objective, findings revealed that the meanings given by the consumers to organic consumption can be categorized into three broad perspectives. They are product, usage and environmental. Under them organic product traits like chemical free and less toxins, naturally grown products, associations of wealth - high priced (depicts a Veblenian ([1899]1994) element towards the organic definition), how differentiated consumer

mindset and varied levels of consumer taste (depicts a Bourdieusian (1984) element towards the organic definition) impact the consumption thereby the meaning given to organic food was evident. These definitions were linked to the status function performed by organic consumption.

It was revealed that consumers can be categorized in to three groups which can be used to discuss the respective status consumption behaviours, namely self-oriented, passionate and superior consumer. Resource requirements for these roles to move towards organic consumptions are wealth and unique consumption knowledge, these are at varied levels which distinct them from the rest of the masses giving them a level of status.

In relation to the second research question findings revealed that consumers attached three broad purposes for organic consumption. They are beautifying the body, consumer green image and health benefits. It was evident that these purposes were embraced by all consumer categories. Yin et al. (2010) state that interest in organic food continues to increase throughout the world in response to concerns about intensive agricultural practices and their possible effects on human health and the environment. Further Lewinson (2009) states that a holistic guide to beautiful skin covers everything from stress relief to organic products. These were in line with the beliefs of the respondents that were interviewed. These purposes, traits of roles and their associated resource levels lead towards how consumers see organic as a form of status consumption and way of using it as a form of status expression.

Shukla (2010) stated that many consumers engage in events in seeking status that involve products not to only satisfy personal needs but also social needs. Similarly during the study it was revealed that in achieving status through organic consumption, either as a seeker or a definer, consumers portrayed organic as status symbols combining the purposes it serves. These are organic a way for a youthful culture (used by self-oriented consumers), food as entertainment and organic consumer as responsible citizen status symbols. The latter two is predominantly perceived by the passionate consumer segment. The superior consumer segment, the status definers associate all of the above status symbols of organic portraying it as a life style consumption choice defining who they are.

All consumer categories identified with their level of wealth direct them towards an organic purchase which is a status seeking or defining outcome respectively that conspicuously highlights their financial strength. Veblen ([1899]1994) states that wealthy individuals often consume highly conspicuous goods and services to advertise their wealth, by this means achieving greater social status. Findings reveal that wealth alone is not sufficient for consumers to go for a respective purchase. The taste has a major role to play. This highlights the importance of educational background, family background and social relations attach to it that defines ones tastes, this constitutes the consumption knowledge which is unique for an organic consumer. As per Bourdieu (1984) this consumption knowledge constitutes ones cultural capital. Possession of this consumption knowledge differentiates individuals from rest of the masses, thus giving them status. This is in line with the findings of Bourdieu (1984) through his theory of cultural capital.

Conclusion

This study revealed that organic consumption takes a form of status consumption within the consumers of the Western province of Sri Lanka. Three consumer categories self-oriented passionate and superior consumer segments were identified who uses organic consumption as a combination of symbols that either defines or as means of seeking status. Some elements of distinction created through organic consumption are explainable through theories by Bourdieu and Veblen in explaining the status outcomes of consumer categories. The study brings about a sociological construction of organic consumption adding a new dimension to this consumption practice, as well as enriching the body of knowledge within which status consumption has been studied in the past.

Practical Implications and Further Research

It is recommended that future research on how consumers of different social classes in Sri Lanka express organic consumption as a mode of status consumption, organic as a life style than a single consumption choice, organic consumption in the context of sustainability can be studied. Findings are insightful for vendors to understand how organic food is placed in the Sri Lankan market assisting market communication and marketing strategies, formulate probable new revenue streams by addressing the roles and purposes of organic consumption in a much broader sense.

Keywords: Emulation; Habitus; Organic Consumption; Status Consumption; Taste

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