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Exploring the social value of organic food

Costa, S., Zepeda L. Sirieix L.

- **Abstract :**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether organic foods are used to signal social identity, class, or status, i.e. if they have social value. Bourdieu's (1979; 1994) approach and symbolic interactionism (Solomon, 1983) are used to frame the causes and consequences of social value and to highlight the marketing implications. Specifically, results of a four focus group study indicate that organic food has a social value, but that its value depends on other green behaviors by the consumer or the producer, and also on the venue (CSA, market, supermarket).

- **Keywords :** organic food, status, Bourdieu, symbolic interactionism, marketing

- **Introduction:**

Worldwide retail sales of organic foods were nearly US\$50 billion in 2009 (Organic Trade Association, 2010). Organic food is a growing market; projections are that it will grow 40% in the next decade (NPD Group, 2009). Yet why people buy organic food is not well understood. Most studies that have examined why people buy organic food have focused on environmental motivations (e.g. Hokanen, Verplanken & Olsen, 2006; Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002) and/or personal health motivations (e.g. Baker et al., 2004; Lusk & Briggeman, 2009). Despite the fact that researchers recognize that food is an expression of identity and values (Senauer, 2001) and lifestyle (Brunso, Scholderer, & Grunert, 2004) no study has looked at whether organic foods are used to signal social identity, class, or status, i.e. whether they have social value.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze if organic foods have a social value using two sociology theories, Bourdieu's (1979; 1994) approach and symbolic interactionism (Solomon, 1983). These are used to better understand the causes and consequences of social value and to highlight the marketing implications of social value. Specifically, does venue affect the social value of organic foods, does the value depend upon associations with other symbols, and is it related to social class, either through social class distinction and reproduction (Bourdieu's theory), or social construction (symbolic interactionism)?

Given the qualitative nature of these questions, a focus group study of organic consumers was used. The four groups were stratified by shopping venue: CSA, markets¹,

¹ In this study we use "market" to refer to open-air markets in France, where sellers may be farmers or middlemen.

and supermarket. The sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis to address these questions.

- **Literature review**

Before focusing on social value, it is essential to briefly present some close concepts used in the organic consumption literature. A number of studies (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Hoogland et al., 2007; Dreezens et al. 2005 a,b) have related organic food consumption to personal values, an enduring belief that a specific end-state or mode of conduct is preferred over others (Rokeach, 1973; Kahle, 1983).

In the Schwartz Value Inventory (Schwartz, 1992) fifty-six value items represent ten value types, which can be further reduced to four value categories: conservatism, self-enhancement, self-transcendence, and openness to change. The social dimension appears in two categories: conservatism with respect to social norms and self-enhancement with respect to social status. Hence, the social value of organic food can be related to self-enhancement. Surprisingly, most studies find that high scores for self-enhancement are negatively correlated, though not always significantly, with attitudes and intentions to buy organic food (e. g. Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Hoogland et al., 2007; Dreezens et al. 2005a, b). To our knowledge, no study revealed a positive correlation.

Lusk and Briggeman (2009) recently applied the concept of overall life personal values to the concept of food. They developed a Food Values scale with eleven dimensions: Naturalness, Taste, Price, Safety, Convenience, Nutrition, Tradition, Origin, Fairness, Appearance, and Environmental Impact. Lusk used this scale to explain demand for organic eggs and milk (Lusk, 2011). However, this scale does not take into account the social dimension of food consumption.

Our analysis of the social value of organic food is based on two sociological approaches: Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and symbolic interactionism (Solomon, 1983). Symbolic interactionism analyzes how individuals build their world of understanding through interactions. It is relevant because it examines how symbols are defined and used within interactions and explains how the social world changes through these interactions. Individuals use these as symbols to communicate status (e.g. Sauder, 2005). So while there is a general social order, it is not fixed. A socialized individual can be changed through interactions; the social self is constructed throughout one's life by all one's interactions.

Bourdieu's (1979, 1994) theory examines social stratification and explains social reproduction. He structures the social world into three dimensions: economic capital, cultural capital (objectified as cultural goods or institutionalized as diplomas), and social capital (relationships). Bourdieu believes that individuals compete to obtain distinction using the three types of capital. The closer individuals are the more they have in common, in terms of taste, lifestyle, and habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as social class structure incorporated through the social class practices one learns as a child. Each person analyzes situations through their habitus, which influences their behavior and helps to reproduce social classes. Goods, practices, and manners are distinctive signals or symbols of different positions in the social order. Moreover, the symbolic power of goods depends on the quantity and the kind of capital necessary to obtain them, and more generally, on the scarcity of the capability required to obtain them.

These two approaches highlight the importance of symbols (symbolic interactionism) and distinction symbols (Bourdieu) in individual behavior. Bourdieu emphasizes the effect of social structures on individual perceptions and practices through habitus (and

thus on the reproduction of social structure), whereas symbolic interactionism gives more weight to the social genesis of collective perceptions and practice through individual interactions (and thus there is no social determinism). In symbolic interactionism, status symbols “act as clear boundary markers” (Sauder, p. 281), between different status categories, while in Bourdieu’s theory, status symbols are used to define one’s membership or non-membership in a social group. For both, symbols may be different goods or practices used in everyday life, such as photography, sports, or food. **Thus, the first research question is, does organic food have a social value?**

Since buying organic food through different venues may necessitate different amounts or kinds of resources, these venues may be associated with different symbolic value. **The second research question is, does the social value of organic food depend on the venue where it is obtained?**

According to Bourdieu, individuals compete to obtain social distinction. In doing so, they may use symbols to pretend to belong to a social class above the one they belong to. In a symbolic interactionist analysis of consumer behavior, Solomon (1983) highlights that the more one is confident in his ability to play a role, the less one will rely on symbols. Further, since sets of symbols are grouped, a symbol does not exist in isolation and as Sauder (2005) emphasizes, status groups are determined by many different behaviors. So, in Bourdieu’s theory as well as in symbolic interactionism, the use of one symbol may not be enough to be recognized as belonging to a social group. **Therefore, the third research question is, are other symbols associated with the social value of organic food?**

Bourdieu emphasizes that social positions (defined by economic and cultural capital) correspond to similar tastes and lifestyles. If habitus influences organic food consumption, different social classes should have different organic food practices. Therefore, organic food consumers would have some common characteristics, particularly in terms of social position. Even if habitus influences individuals through their cognitive structures, in Bourdieu's "*Raisons Pratiques*" as well as in symbolic interactionism, status symbols are defined through daily interactions. However, symbolic interactionism gives more weight to daily interactions, whereas Bourdieu gives more weight to habitus. Therefore, the last research question concerns the link between social class reproduction and organic food consumption. **Is the symbolic value of organic food consumption related to social class (Bourdieu), and/or is it related to an ongoing process of social construction (symbolic interactionism)?**

- **Methods**

To address these questions, our population of interest was organic food shoppers. We use a qualitative approach because our research questions are not quantifiable, structured, closed-end questions. Qualitative data collection permitted us to ask open-ended questions and probe answers. We chose a focus group methodology as opposed to individual interviews because not only was it less costly, it permitted social interaction that allowed clarification of ideas through discussion. Given the high likelihood of social desirability bias due to the nature of our investigation (social class), we framed our questions indirectly, and from the general to the specific. First, we asked

participants to describe what people in general think about organic shoppers, then what people they know think, and finally what they think.

Our research design involved one focus group of organic consumers (it is a mixed focus group in terms of venue) to investigate the social value of organic food; and three focus groups to investigate the importance of shopping venue: one group who bought organic food from a CSA, one group of market shoppers, and one group that bought organic food from a supermarket. We chose to use homogeneous groups in terms of shopping venues in the expectation that consumers will talk more easily about common experiences.

However, the market group did contain some people who also belonged to a CSA because they had personal schedule conflicts.

For the four focus groups, we kept the same frame for the guidelines: we talked about “others in general” in the first part, then “your friends and relatives,” and then about “you.” The wording of some questions was adapted for each group depending upon venue. This allowed us to analyze the link between venue and status, as well as the status of organic food consumption (whatever the venue). The Appendix provides the framework of the questions.

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, then analyzed for content to address the research questions.

The first research question concerns the existence of social value for organic food. To verify that organic food has a social value, we propose three hypotheses:

- a) If organic food has a social value, consumers of the focus groups will mention this even if the facilitator of the focus group does not ask about status. The questions we used to draw out responses were, “How do people who don’t belong to a CSA

see people who do belong to a CSA?” (CSA focus group) or “How do people who don’t consume organic food see those who :

- i. consume organic food?” (organic focus group)
 - ii. buy organic food at a market?” (market focus group)
 - iii. buy organic food at a supermarket?” (supermarket focus group)
- b) If organic food has a social value, it acts as a boundary marker between those who consume it and those who do not (symbolic interactionism). While for Bourdieu, status symbols define one’s social group by also defining the social groups one does not belong to. In Bourdieu’s terms, “In other words, the central idea (of distinction) is that an individual exists at a place and time in space to differentiate, to be different.” (Bourdieu, 1994, p 24). To verify this hypothesis, we analyze the meaning and the words respondents used.
- c) If organic food has a social value, those who consume it use it as a symbol. However, neither organic food nor the purchasing venue may be evident to other people. So to verify this hypothesis, we ask focus group participants whether their acquaintances, friends, and family know whether they belong to a CSA (for CSA members), whether they consume organic food and where they buy it (all groups)? Do they talk about organic food and the venue, respectively? If so, when?

The second research question concerns the link between the social value of organic food and purchasing venue. To answer to this question, we asked each focus group about how they were perceived by those who shopped at other venues. For instance, in the

CSA focus group, “How do people who buy organic food at a market, or a supermarket, see people who buy organic food in a CSA?”

The third research question is about the use of organic food as a symbol: can it be used alone, or not? No specific questions were asked about this. Rather, we analyzed the discussions to see if respondents associated organic food with other symbols.

The last research question is about the link between organic food consumption and social classes: does habitus strongly influence the social value of organic food (Bourdieu), or is the social value of organic food negotiated through day-to-day interactions among individuals (symbolic interactionism)? To analyze this question, two hypothesis are proposed:

- a) If Bourdieu’s habitus has a strong influence on organic food consumption, different social classes should have different organic food consumption behavior. Therefore, it should be possible to categorize organic food consumers into homogeneous social classes. A specific question concerns this point, “What do you have in common, or not, with other people who consume organic food (mixed focus group)?” or “with people who :
 - i. belong to a CSA (CSA focus group)?”
 - ii. buy organic food (mixed group) ?”
 - iii. buy organic food at a market (market group), or a supermarket (supermarket group)?”
- b) If the culture of organic food consumption is an on-going process (symbolic interactionism) the symbolic value of organic food is determined through daily

interactions. No specific question concerns this point; we analyzed the transcripts searching for discussion of linkages between daily interactions and changes in perception of the value of organic food.

- **Results**

Twenty people participated in the four focus groups: seven in the first focus group (CSA members only), four in the market group, three in the organic group, and six in the supermarket group. As shown by table 1, individuals differ in terms of income, but they all have the same education level, except two participants. They are mostly young singles or couples with no children, but some are older, or have a family.

[Table 1]

Individuals 1 to 7 participated in the CSA focus group, individuals 8 to 11 participated in the market focus group, individuals 12 to 14 participated in the organic focus group, and 15 to 20 participated in the supermarket focus group. In the second and third focus groups, all individuals buy organic food at markets, but some of them are also CSA members; the second focus group questions are about the status of market venue for organic food; the third focus group concerns the status of organic food whatever the venue. Some of the participants of the supermarket focus group buy also at a market. Table 2 presents shopping venues by individual.

[Table 2]

Does organic food have a social value?

The focus group discussion indicates that organic food does have a social value for twelve participants: they use words like “*bobos*” (bourgeois-bohemians), “snobs,”

“privileged,” and “fashion” when they talk about how people in general view people who buy organic food. For two of the three participants of the third focus group, consuming organic food makes them different from other people; one participant employed the term “alien,” the other talked about a different lifestyle. All the participants of the second focus group talked about “a radically different way of consuming”. P8 says, “It’s not positive, it’s also not negative, it’s a societal category² .”

The focus groups gave details about the circumstances under which consumers may use organic food as a symbol. All the participants of the focus groups were able to say whether people they know (friends, neighbors, colleagues, or family) buy organic food and where they buy it (at a supermarket, a market, or a CSA). They all said that food practices are a subject of discussion that comes up very often during meals, after food shopping, or, for one participant, during discussions about purchasing power.

Does its social value depend upon where the organic food is obtained?

As expected, the social value of organic food may depend on the channel of purchase. More precisely, for six (three belonging to a CSA) of the 20 participants, CSA members are different from people who buy organic food at a market, who are different from people who buy at the supermarket. Among these respondents, four associated the highest social value with CSAs, then markets, then supermarkets. For instance, P9 says: “If I had to rank, in terms of involvement, for me CSA members would be first, then those who buy at a market, and then those who buy organic.” For three participants (one belonged to a CSA and two shopped at markets) of the 20 participants, CSA members and people who buy at an organic market are similar, but different from people who buy

² Literally : pigeon-hole.

organic food at a supermarket. One participant of the supermarket focus group talked only of the difference between CSA members and supermarket buyers.

Moreover, four participants of the supermarket focus group consider that the social value of organic food is not the same in specialized organic supermarkets as it is in normal supermarkets; for instance, individual 17 said, "It's really a different territory," and individual 20 said, "Specialized supermarkets look like a cult."

For many of those who see a difference in social value depending on venue, the difference comes from the political desire to help producers. They employed words such as "political involvement" and "activist." In the first case, they thought that the political involvement was stronger for CSA members than for those who shopped at a market or supermarket. In the second case, they differentiated between those who buy organic foods via a CSA or market and those who shopped only at a supermarket.

Turning now to the Bourdieu's theory of distinction, participants talked about economic capital required to buy organic foods, e.g. the higher price of organic food, but also the added time costs of going to market or CSA (4 persons). In addition, three CSA members thought that specific social capital was necessary to belong to a CSA, for instance P8 said, "from time to time it demands juggling responsibilities, handling the responsibility of contracts and all that...you also have to be able to deal with a little, uh, social stress."

Two people in the supermarket focus group talked about differences in terms of knowledge, or cultural capital, between supermarket shoppers and shoppers at specialized organic supermarkets; for instance, P17 said, "in these shops [specialized organic supermarkets], I feel like an idiot, and others know everything...it's an obstacle

for me.” This corroborates findings of Tapp and Warren’s (2010) sociological analysis of English society; they found group differentiation through ecological knowledge.

Are other symbols associated with the social value of organic food?

Symbolic consumption can be a way of pretending to be someone we are not. For some of our participants, organic food consumption has to be associated to other symbols to have full social value. Two participants talked about organic food consumption as a way to ease one’s conscience (towards the environment), implying that such people did not exhibit other environmental behaviors. For instance, talking about CSA consumers, P6 said, “They [non CSA members] think it’s good because it’s organic and it’s kind to the farmer, but people who go to a CSA, it’s not always very positive [interrupts self]. Rather, they see it as a way of easing their conscience.” Another respondent talked about “two kinds of CSA members,” one that was simply a member and another who is more active and politically engaged. Two participants talked about the social value of organic food, saying that they used many criteria (or symbols as defined by Bourdieu and symbolic interactionism), not just the organic label (e.g. signs, quantity sold, recycling behavior, and product origin) to choose whom to buy from.

Is organic food’s symbolic value associated with social class or ongoing social construction?

Results of our focus groups do not give clear results about social class and organic food consumption. On one hand, we were not able to characterize homogeneous groups of organic food consumers. When we asked, “what do you have in common, or not, with other CSA members (or other market/supermarket buyers or other organic food buyers, depending on the focus group)?” 11 people talked about differences (in terms of age, jobs, income, and lifestyle), while seven talked about things in common (in terms of

reading material, jobs, and political ideas). For instance, P9 says about CSA members, “As there are a lot of different people in the CSA, it’s rather complicated to compare with so much heterogeneity. Maybe they look to be the same when looking from afar, but looking close, they are all different.” When we asked about a good or bad experience at the market, P11 talked about “people who think they are in a supermarket and cut in front, ‘I’ll take that.’ They are the ones who live on grand streets in big houses, ‘I have an exclusive address, a fancy job and only go to the best places.’ ” Two participants agreed with this. Moreover, if we adopt Holt’s (1998) approach to cultural capital, in the CSA focus group, individuals who value the cultural skill they obtain from belonging to a CSA are those from higher social classes (in terms of culture, social references, and behaviors).

Some of the participants talked about daily interactions in terms of the social value of organic food. For instance P12 said, “Often when people know you eat organic food, they ask you about other things and say, oh but you don’t do this or you don’t do that.” She also talked about producers who recognized her. Another participant talked about inviting his neighbors to his house and they recognized the bread as being from a particular vendor at the market. Four participants (two CSA members) demonstrated political commitment to expanding organic food consumption or to specific venues; they indicated they talk about it very often and try to encourage others to buy organic (1 respondent), or to become a CSA member (2 respondents), or to buy at a market (1 participant). On the other hand, five participants said that they do not have the same goal.

- **Discussion**

Our analysis of four focus groups shows that organic food has a social value for the participants. From a marketing point of view, this is useful for at least two reasons. First, one can incorporate this into promotional campaigns for organic food. Currently in France promotional campaigns for organic foods are based mainly on health and the environment.

Secondly, the analysis helps identify which products generate higher value from being labeled. Indeed, the use of an organic label might be less efficient if there is no congruence between the social value of the product and the social value of the organic label (Aaker & Keller, 1990).

Moreover, for the participants of our focus groups, the social value of organic food does depend on the context. By itself (regardless of venue or other behaviors), it is more often associated with high purchasing power than with real involvement in environmental protection. For these organic food consumers, the social value of organic food depends on one's other environmental behaviors or one's involvement with producers. As a consequence, purchasing organic food directly from producers or through a CSA is valued more than purchasing it at a supermarket.

However, analysis of consumers' behavior often indicates that the more efforts they require, the less environmental behaviors are adopted. Moreover, consumer segments that adopt such behaviors often belong (or are presumed to belong) to the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) segment (Kurisu & Bortoleto, 2011).

From a marketing point of view, this means that supermarkets need to do more for the environment or producers than simply sell organic food to be considered "green" by green consumers. This is also true for markets; two participants indicated that an

organic label was not enough. They also look at the bag recycling behavior of sellers and the type of communication they use. Ironically, the more signs sellers use with organic labels, the less they trust them.

On the consumer side, for some consumers, consuming organic food is not enough to project a green image. This implies that organic food by itself would not be an effective symbol of environmental involvement in advertising.

- **Conclusion**

Our focus group results provide affirmative answers to the first three research questions and indicate that while there is support for ongoing social construction, we do not have enough observations to support social class distinction and reproduction. This suggests that a large quantitative study of social value of organic food would be of great interest, to verify whether what we observed for a few consumers is true on a larger scale, and also to have a sufficient sample size to test for social class influence.

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Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the focus group participants

Participant number	age	sex	household type	Children at home (#, age)	Education ³	profession	household income (€/month)
1	36	F	Couple	No	Bac +3	employee	2 to 3000
2	44	H	Single parent	1 (11)	Bac +3	Skilled worker	<1000
3	28	F	Couple	no	Student		<1000
4	24	H	Couple	no	Bac +3		<1000
5	38	H	Family	2 (6, 9)	Bac +3	Professional	>4000
6	25	F	Couple	no	Student		<1000
7	26	H	Shared	yes	Bac +3	Professional	>4000
8	39	H	Couple	no	Bac + 3	Professional	>4000
9	24	F	Shared	no	Student		<1000
10	23	F	Shared	no	Student		<1000
11	36	H	Couple	no	Bac + 2	employee	2 to 3000
12	24	F	Couple	no	Bac+3	Professional	1 to 2000
13	64	H	Single		Bac + 3	Retired	<1000
14	65	F	Couple	no	Bac	Retired	3 to 4000
15	65	F	Single	no	BEPC	Retired	<1000
16	58	F	Couple	no	Bac + 3	Professional	2 to 3000
17	64	H	Couple	no	Bac + 3	Retired	2 to 3000
18	30	F	Shared	no	Bac + 2	Employee	1 to 2000
19	33	F	Single	no	Bac + 3	Professional	1 to 2000
20	69	H	Couple	no	Bac + 3	Retired	3 to 4000

³³ Education levels refer to the French educational system. Bac+3 is roughly equivalent to a masters degree, Bac+2 to a Bachelor, Bac to an Associate Degree (or A levels in the UK), and BEPC is equivalent to a US High School Degree.

Table 2. Shopping venues used to purchase organic food by participant

Participant number	CSA member	Buy from the producer directly	Buy at a market	Buy at a supermarket
1	yes	No	yes	No
2	yes	No	No	Yes
3	yes	No	yes	Yes
4	yes	No	yes	No
5	yes	Yes	yes	Yes
6	yes	Yes	yes	Yes
7	yes	Yes	yes	Yes
8	no	No	yes	Yes
9	yes	No	yes	Yes
10	yes	No	yes	Yes
11	no	Yes	yes	Yes
12	yes	No	yes	No
13	no	No	yes	No
14	No	No	Yes	No
15	No	No	No	Yes
16	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	No	No	Yes	Yes
18	No	No	Yes	Yes
19	No	Yes	No	Yes
20	No	No	No	Yes

Appendix : Guideline of the focus group discussions

This is the guideline for the organic focus group. The words in italics change according to focus group.

People in general

- How do people in general see *organic food consumers*?
- How do people who don't *consume organic food* see those who do?
- Describe people who think it's good to *consume organic food*?
- *Does their opinion of organic food consumers depend on the venue (CSA, market, supermarket) ?*

People you know

- Do you know other people who are *organic food consumers*?
- Do they talk about it? When and where?
- Do people you know, know that you *consume organic foods*?

You

- Initially, why did you decide to go to *your venue* to buy organic foods?
- Has your opinion of *your venue(s)* changed?
- Does *organic food consumption* require any special efforts? Does *your venue* require any special effort?
- Do you remember a positive or negative experience at *your venue*?
- What interactions do you have with others at *your venue*?
- Do you remember a positive or negative experience with other people at *your venue*?
- What do you have in common, or not, with other people *who consume organic foods*?
- What have you learned since you started shopping at *your venue*?