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Organic food as luxury fashion in South Korea

Sales of organic food are growing rapidly, including in Asia. But why do consumers buy organic? A recent study in South Korea suggests that marketing research has over-focused on individual consumers making more or less rational purchase decisions – for example, because of perceived health benefits.**

The researchers introduce a “social practices” lens for understanding why consumers buy organic. Social practices involve the routines and processes of understanding, knowledge and aspiration. The social practices lens reveals that shared “doings and sayings” across consumer culture inform purchase motives. Using this lens, the researchers find that organics have become something of a luxury fashion trend in South Korea.

In order to investigate motives behind the rapid increase in high cost organics consumption in South Korea, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews in Seoul with people who had eaten organic products regularly for at least five years and considered themselves knowledgeable about it.

Three themes from the interviews suggested parallels between organic consumption and luxury fashion. First, interviewees considered eating organic as an investment in their long-term wellbeing, symbolically as well as functionally. The price premium symbolised quality, justifying this investment practice. Such symbolism especially showed up among consumers buying for loved ones, including children.

Second, through their purchases, participants were expressing sustainability values because they saw organic farming as kinder on nature. As occurs in fashion consumption, participants willingly paid a premium for luxury versus non-luxury goods because the former represented sustainability. Similarly, they discriminated among outlets and labels (such as “animal welfare approved”).

The third practice was signaling social status. Not only were participants showing they could afford luxuries, they felt they were fulfilling a moral obligation to the environment, organic farmers and animal welfare. They also cited the organic consumption practices of celebrities – closely associated with luxury.

These findings suggest that the social practices associated with organic food consumption are very similar to practices associated with luxury fashion. Even the tensions associated with the idea of “luxury” -- between the idea of luxury as reserved for an elite, and luxury as something that ordinary people can aspire to – are similar.

Marketers of organics can take away lessons on brand positioning. Accentuating the variety of consumer differences in value perception is essential. Organics can be positioned not only as healthy and green, but also as a luxury fashion product.

**The full study results are available in an article by 'Ilaisaane M.E. Fifita, Yuri Seo, Eunju Ko, Denise Conroy and Dayun Hong: “Fashioning organics: Wellbeing, sustainability, and status consumption practices”. Journal of Business Research, 2019.

