

Consumers' Understanding of Sustainability of Organic Food Products and its Effect on Quality Perception

Master Thesis at the Section of Agricultural Engineering

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Summary

German consumers are very committed organic food consumers; the German organic market is one of the biggest in the world and demand for organic food products is in accordance. In order to develop the supply, also the food production and processing methods should be develop to be more sustainable. This thesis research investigated for the use of SusOrganic research project what is the consumers' sustainability understanding of organic food products and how it influence to the quality perception. A consumer survey was executed in three German cities comprehending four different types of grocery stores in July 2015. 244 regular organic food consumers participated in the survey. The questionnaire contained a qualitative question and quantitative questions; qualitative content analysis was executed as well as the quantitative data was analysed with SPSS. The consumers' sustainability understanding was analysed in terms of the three sustainability dimension and also supply chain phases.

The respondents had relatively similar understanding of sustainability, some differences were found between the cities and store types. Majority of the respondents regarded organic food production more sustainable than conventional organic food production. Environmental sustainability was mentioned the most commonly in the responses followed by social sustainability. Economical sustainability was considered seldom in the responses. The emphasis of the sustainability understanding was on the agricultural phase of the food production.

The respondents have mainly correct knowledge of the differences between organic and conventional agriculture but unconsciousness was observed regarding the other supply chain phases. Besides admitting the lack of information, the responses contained also confusion with other food production concepts, beliefs and impreciseness. Some respondents preferred regional and small-scale production more sustainable than conventional or organic; alternative supply chains could be a potential alternative for organic food production to respond the demand of certain consumer segment.

Quality perception of the products as well as buying decision inducement emphasised the sustainability related characteristics; the more committed the consumer is with organic food the higher the sustainability related characteristics were ranked. Quality perception of the organic food consumers was found to be driven by altruistic values. Food quality evaluation criterion of sustainable consumer is different than the criterion of the consumer preferring conventional food products. Sustainability values were found to have an impact to quality perception but due to the sample which was rather heterogenic of its understanding of sustainability, the effect of the understanding could not be evaluated. A further research investigating the sustainability understanding and quality perception differences between the consumer groups with the different attitudes towards organic food is recommended.