

## CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AND VALUES DRIVING ORGANIC FOOD CHOICE IN LATVIA: A MEANS-END CHAIN APPROACH

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is twofold: to offer insights into the Latvian organic food market exploring the values that underlie consumers purchasing decisions, and to illustrate how means-end chain theory can be applied to map communications that convey effective messages to potential consumers. Focus groups and Laddering interviews were conducted and means-end chain value map designed. The results show that most Latvian consumers consider organic products as very healthy, of good quality and taste. However, these products are perceived as rather expensive and of questionable appearance. Consumers highly concerned on health and safety of food product and on friendlier with the environment production systems would be more willing to buy organic products. Means-end chain theory and laddering technique appear to be valuable for mapping consumer decision making process and providing advices for communication. The findings have implications for future sector-based communication to consumers and, potentially, for product development and labelling.

**Keywords:** organic food, consumer behaviour, consumer decision making, means-end theory, laddering technique.

**Jel classification:** M31.

### 1. Introduction

Interest in organically produced food is increasing throughout the world in response to concerns about conventional agricultural practices, food safety and human health concerns, animal welfare considerations and concern about the environment and as a result the organic sector is expected to grow significantly in the future (Tarkiainen, Sundqvist 2005).

As more organic consumers emerge, the importance of understanding their motivations grows (Berlin 2011). Organic food satisfies the same need as conventional food, still it is more expensive and sometimes has worth visual characteristics. Organic food information perceived by consumers is an important issue in the organic food market because it represents the only instrument that consumers have to differentiate the attributes of organic food products from those of conventional ones, and build positive attitudes towards the organic ones (Magistris, Gracia 2008). Price and lack of variety seems to be the main reasons of why consumers hesitate to buy organic food. Some researchers argue that consumers' lack of knowledge concerning organic food (Aertsens *et al.* 2011).

The future of organic agriculture will, to a large extent, depend on consumer demand (Bonti–Ankomah 2006). Therefore, identifying factors that explain the consumers' decision-making process is important for consumption promotion and will help to evaluate the future perspective of the demand for organic food products. Most of the marketers have a poorly developed understanding of what really motivates the organic consumer and what might encourage them to buy organic products on a more regular basis and how sensitive they really are to price issue. Therefore there is a big problem and scares in starting up organic food niche business as the intention to purchase organic food and the trade-offs consumers are willing to make for a better environment and health remain unclear.

The market for organic products in Latvia is at the beginning of its development and knowledge about organic consumers is insufficient thus the arena of research is very wide. In order to narrow down the scope of this research, organic baby food is chosen as it has been identified as most perspective among organic food items. Sedlinieks (2011) is sure that consumers in Latvia are ready to spend more money for organic baby food than some years ago. Moreover, psychologists admit that if the few small organic stores in Latvia are able to survive then there is also a demand for this production. This paper strives to fill the gap in the knowledge of consumer attitude towards organic baby food market in Latvia.

Consequently the overall *aim of this research* is to investigate the factors that impact the female consumer buying behaviour and the decision making process of organic baby food products in order to provide the companies engaged in this sphere of business with guidelines and recommendations that will enable them to satisfy the needs of Latvian consumers in a more effective way. Means-end chain theory representing a cognitive network in consumers' minds structured in hierarchical form (Zanoli, Naspetti 2002) is used as a tool to understand buying behaviour.

Thus the purpose of this study is twofold: to offer insights into the Latvian organic food market exploring the values that underlie consumers purchasing decisions, as well as to illustrate how means-end chain theory can be applied to map communications that convey effective messages to potential consumers.

The paper is structured as follows: first the theoretical aspects of consumer buying behaviour including means-end model and laddering technique are described, brief overview of organic food market and organic consumers behaviour is provided, further research process description and results are presented.

## **2. Understanding consumer behaviour**

Consumer behaviour has many unexpected dimensions as the human mind contains many interacting neurons and the way consumers make their choices among various products involves a fascinating array of factors (Kotler *et al.* 2002).

Guiltinan (1990) expresses that consumer behaviour is the subset of human behaviour that is concerned with the decisions and acts of individuals in purchasing and using products, while Baker (1991) defines consumer behaviour as those acts

of individuals directly involved in obtaining and using economic goods and services. Therefore, consumer behaviour can be defined as the behaviour that consumers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs (Assael 1995).

Consumer purchases are strongly influenced by culture, social, personal and psychological characteristics. For the most part, marketers cannot control such factors, but they must be taken into account. In order to understand what drives consumers Kotler’s Black Box Model presents good illustration as it emphasize the process as well as the factors that impact the decision (Fig. 1).

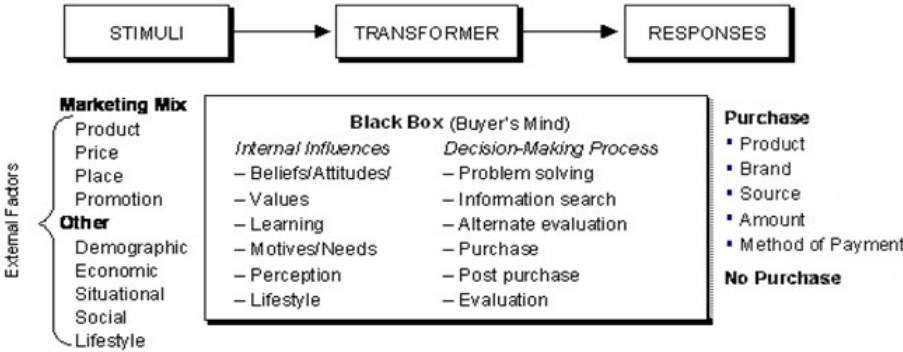


Fig. 1. Black Box Model (Source: Kotler et. al 2004)

According to the model, some factors are external and some are internal. Companies may influence the marketing stimuli in order to achieve the desired response. Demographics, economic, situational, social, lifestyle factors are dictated by the environment and are largely out of control of the companies and consumers.

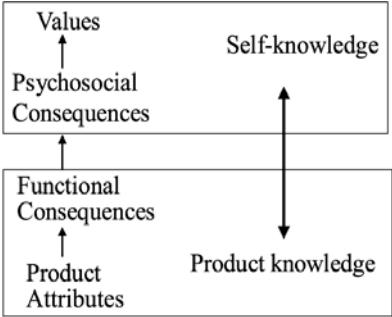
Two widely used marketing approaches to consumer behaviour are cognitive and behavioural (Zanoli, Naspetti 2002). Cognitive approaches emphasise mental structures and thinking processes, whereas behavioural direct links between environment and behaviour. In case with organic food, when price and appearance works against the purchase decision, cognitive approach, which includes mental and emotional aspects, seems more appropriate.

The cognitive approach is represented by means-end chain theory which is described further.

**2.1. Means–end chain model**

The means-end chain model has a hierarchical cognitive structure, and explains how consumers’ product knowledge is connected with their self-knowledge (Fotopoulos et al. 2003). Means are product attributes that connect to ends, which are different states valued by the consumer, like for example happiness, security

and accomplishments. Fig. 2 below presents the means-end chain model and process how attributes are linked to consumer's values.



**Fig. 2.** Linking values to products: the means-end chain model (Source: Zanoli, Naspetti 2002)

The consequences can be both of physiological and psychological nature. These can affect the consumer both in a positive or a negative way. Physiological consequences can be for example that hunger and thirst needs are satisfied, while psychological consequences can be for example an improved self-esteem, but it can also be of sociological nature like for example improved status and group membership (Gutman 1982). This means that the consumer choice is based on product attributes that in turn lead to different consequences that satisfy personal values (Kaciak, Cullen 2006).

In means-end chain theory consumer decision-making is considered like a problem solving process. In order to understand why consumers are interested in purchasing a product, it is necessary to understand the nature of this finalized decisional process and therefore of what they want or try to achieve through the purchase (Zanoli, Naspetti 2002).

Decision making process Black box model (Kotler *et al.* 2004) emphasise more links between characteristics of environment and behaviour, however means-end chain model emphasise mental structures and thinking process. Both should be taken into consideration in order to understand consumer decision - making. The use of means-end chain model will give a deeper insight into the barriers that still prevent a larger demand of organic products in the Latvian market. Since the study aimed at evaluating and connecting product knowledge and product experience as relevant determinants of the consumer information base, the means-end chain aims to understand to what degree and how consumers comprehend organic product information.

**2.2 Organic market and behaviour of organic consumers**

The market for organic food is described as promising and has been predicted to grow strongly in many European countries (Honkanen 2006). There is no definite definition of organic regarding the fact that different countries have different

standard for products to be certified under organic (Kwan 2009). In simplest words, organic foods are minimally processed to maintain the integrity of the food without artificial ingredients, preservatives or irradiation. Organic products are obtained by friendly process to the environment, by cultivation techniques that consider both the attributes of the final product and the production methods (Kwan 2009). In addition, Truong (2009) determines that organic foods are produced through a natural system that enhances biological cycles, reduces pollution, and simultaneously providing livestock and farmers a safe and healthy environment.

Moreover organic food promotes a balance of human, other living organisms and the nature. It also promotes no artificial preservatives and best maintain the originality of food (Kwan 2009). Therefore, organic foods generally contain less harmful additives and more primary and secondary nutrients than conventional foods, and they carry no additional risk of food poisoning (Chen 2009). Thus products that are relatively free from unwanted chemicals reduce intake of toxins that can cause short and long term health problems (Cloud 2012).

The organic product is usually perceived to be a premium product. There will and should always be a price differential to reflect the quality difference between organic and conventional products (Hill, Lynchehaun 2002).

With respect to labelling, the organic designation is reserved for products with a minimum of 95% organic ingredients (Cloud 2012). Consequently, quality signals, such as product labels, help transform credence characteristics into search attributes, thereby enabling buyers to more clearly assess product quality (Connor, Douglas 2001).

*Organic consumers* are more health conscious and insist that organic products are more natural, healthier and taste better than not organic products. According to Blake (2008) organic consumer is a person who is responsible for buying food for the household and who buys organic food at least once or twice per month. Organic consumers value people who buy organic products and they believe that they are doing a very good thing towards environment, as well as for the society and animal welfare.

According to previous studies (Berlin 2011) the typical consumer of the organic products profile is as follows: female, 35 – 60 years old, aware and attentive to the health concerns of her family and attends the market regularly. What do organic consumers think, that is, what is in their minds concerning organic products is a determinant factor of consumer preference for organic food (Blake 2008). The major values of organic consumer that are further shown in the means – end model are health, well – being and happiness, achievement, enjoyment, pleasure, a healthy and long life experience, economics, quality in life, family and friends, responsibility for other creatures, environment, time, trust, education.

### 3. Research method and design

Laddering technique is considered as a useful technique of qualitative research in understanding behaviours in order to explore consumer opinions, attitudes, beliefs. Laddering is qualitative research technique aimed to obtain hierarchical network of meanings - ladders or means-end chains (MNC) or hierarchical value maps (Phillips, Reynolds 2009). Sorensen and Askegaard (2007) characterise his technique as quick and structured way of “tapping into the voices of the marketplace”. Mulvey and Kavalam (2010) call these structures consumer decision maps. Laddering refers to an in-depth, one-on-one interviewing technique used to develop an understanding of how consumers translate the attributes of products into meaningful associations with respect to self, following means-end theory (Veludo-de-Oliveira *et al.* 2006). According to means-end theory, it is possible to link sequentially in a value - hierarchy, product attributes to consequences of product use and to individuals' values forming a chain called ladder or means-end model (Fotopoulos *et al.* 2003).

In order to evaluate applicability of laddering technique by comparing results gained by cognitive and behavioural approaches, both are used in this study. Behavioural approach is based on Black Box model (*RQ1*), while cognitive approach is represented by means-end chain models (*RQ2*).

*Research Question 1:* What are the main factors influencing Latvian female consumer willingness to purchase organic baby food products?

The aim of this question is to examine the most important factors that influence female consumer's behaviour. This question deals more with behavioural approach and reveals *what* the consumers do. The relevance of this research question is examined by the fact that consumer buying behaviour for the great extent influence the effectiveness of the decision making process.

*Research Question 2:* How the female consumer decision – making process of purchasing organic baby food products is explained?

The aim of this research question is to examine the female consumer decision-making process towards organic baby food products from cognitive approach. And explain *why* the consumers do what they do. Cognitive approach is based on consumer knowledge, product perception and need satisfaction. Each stage of the decision – making process is analyzed in order to understand the major barriers that decrease the willingness of female consumers to purchase organic baby food products.

Women are chosen as main respondents due to their higher propensity to purchase organic food. The research sample includes Latvian female consumers living in Riga city of diverse income level, educational backgrounds and occupations, aged 21 – 40 with at least one child, aged 0 – 3. The non-probability convenience sampling method was implemented in order to collect information from female members of the population who were conveniently available to provide it.

The data is collected by means of focus groups consisting of 6 – 8 members and face-to-face laddering interviews. Sample size is 28 individuals chosen on the basis of their expertise in the topic at a particular location and specific time. During the interviews attitudes, purchase frequency, supply satisfaction, beliefs and values associated with organic foods were studied. The focus group interviews were recorded in a tape in order to facilitate the data analysis. Additional information regarding the demographic characteristics was also collected (age, marital status, income level, education, number of children in family). The coding method was applied. The first step involved in the data analysis was the data reduction. Secondly the data was categorized under the process of organizing, arranging and classifying the coding themes. Thirdly the data was displayed along quotes, frequently mentioned phrases, graphs and charts so that the drawing of conclusions could be eventually facilitated.

#### 4. Analysis and interpretation of results

Present situation in Latvian organic baby food market indicate expected growth by a constant retail value of 2% as the economic recovery in Latvia helps to restore the purchasing power of consumers and lead to increase in birth rate.

**Product:** At present “Rūdolfs Mom’s Delicious Purees” product is the only baby food produced in Latvia from farming products grown on Latvian organic farms. Well known imported organic baby food brand is Hipp Organic has been making organic baby foods for over 50 years. The baby food range includes jars, cereals, fruit pots, tray meals, wholesome pots and snacks. (Hipp organic, n. d.). Other organic baby food brands include Holle, Rapunzel, Sunval, Vivani, Pro-bijo, Topfer and Organix. The products offered are organic milk, organic milk porridges, cereals, organic food jars, yogurts, biscuits, fruit bars, organic pasta, purees, juices, etc.

**Price:** At present the price premium for organic food in Latvia are high and often exceed 100 percent due to low supply, high distribution costs, relatively high gross margins and high share of products of foreign origin. Some examples of product prices are shown below: Organic milk porridges (600g) 5 – 10 LVL; Purees (250 g) 2-3 LVL; Food jars, cereals (200g) 1 – 2 LVL; Biscuits (250 g) 0.80 – 2 LVL; Fruit bars, juices 0.50 – 1.50 LVL.

**Place:** At the moment it is possible to purchase organic baby food in 7 online stores, 17 small stores in Riga and biggest Latvian cities. There is an eco store in every SKY supermarket, in Mols, Stockman, Galerija Riga and Spice Home. The most popular are “Bioteka”, “Maijiņa”, “Čibu Čabu” and “Veselības Ligzda”. Specialized organic food shops have a high share in organic food sales but they have many disadvantages like unfavourable store location, low share of organic certified food and high prices due to relatively high gross margins.

#### **4.1. Consumer behaviour in respect to organic food**

From discussions in the focus groups both organic and non-organic consumers defined the term 'organic' in a similar way - organic food is food, which is more natural and healthy versus standard alternatives. The respondents in the focus groups had very little knowledge about organic baby food.

Some participants in the focus groups, who previously had had more knowledge about organic food, recently have been less attentive to it mainly due to the price issue. Some women said that they would love to buy only organic baby food, but if someone else could pay for it. Thus, price was a common reason for a total of 14 persons. Many women felt guilt regarding their grocery shopping, most of the mothers explained that they really want to buy organic baby food, because of the baby's health and because of the fact that it would be much better for the environment and animals. Most of the respondents added that they try to buy organic baby food when these products are on sale moreover it makes them feel that they have done something good. Respondents believe that organic eggs taste better; moreover they feel that they are doing something good and they know that the organic farm hens have a higher standard of living. 20 females explained that it is worth spending money on organic baby food because of the benefit sides for the child. Respondents admitted that organic baby food is actually enjoyment.

However, the respondents noticed that the supply of organic baby food is not big enough. All the participants in the focus groups were influenced by *external factors*. They admitted that friends, family and relatives have a very strong influence on their buying behaviour. Women expresses that in case someone told them that there is a great deal in a store or if any organic baby products were recommended by their friends, family, etc., female members would consider changing grocery store for that special product even the store was further away.

Most of the respondents pointed out that cultural factors have influenced them a lot. The values and norms of healthy eating habits have come through life experience, especially from the participant parents and the environment they are living in.

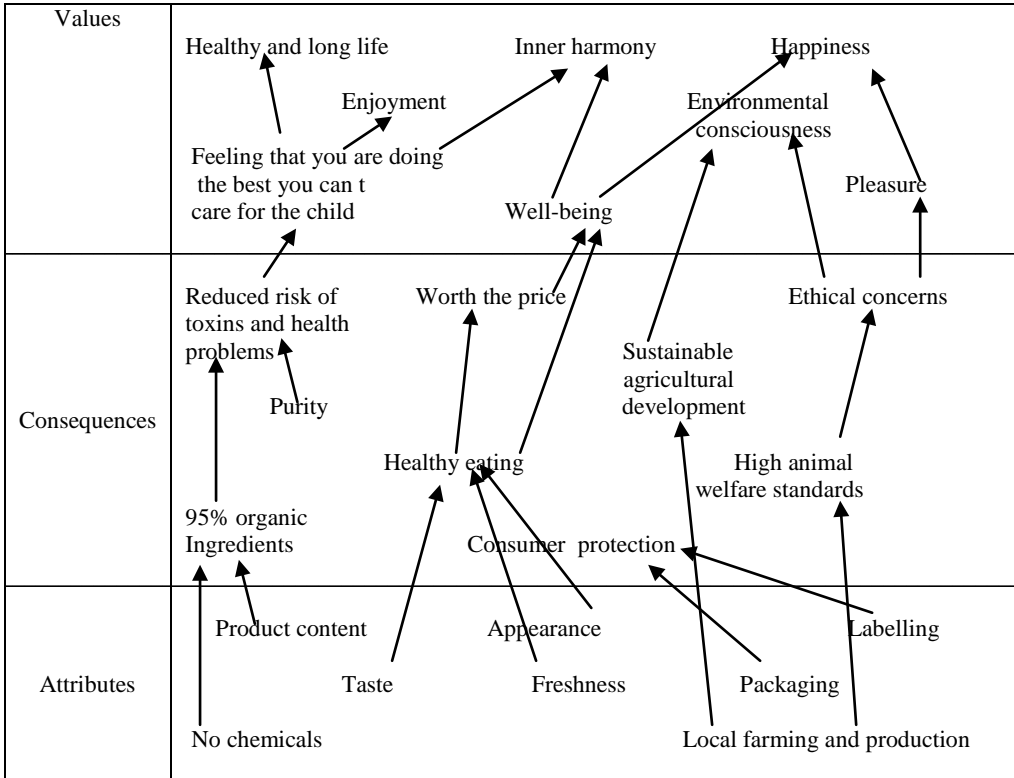
Regarding advertisements, female members have not noticed them much. Thus respondents explain that special deals in the stores affect them more than the regular advertising.

#### **4.2. Cognitive value maps**

Cognitive actors connected with consumers' personalities are listed as attributes, consequences and values. Attributes mentioned were more in the side of barriers, like high price, questionable appearance, and unclear label. Positive side includes healthy content, purity, no additives and chemical preservatives, packaging, etc. The consequences/benefits of the cited attributes were identified as: healthy eating, good image, value for money, no damage to health, development of sustainable agriculture, feel pleasure, physically feel better and socially acceptable respective-



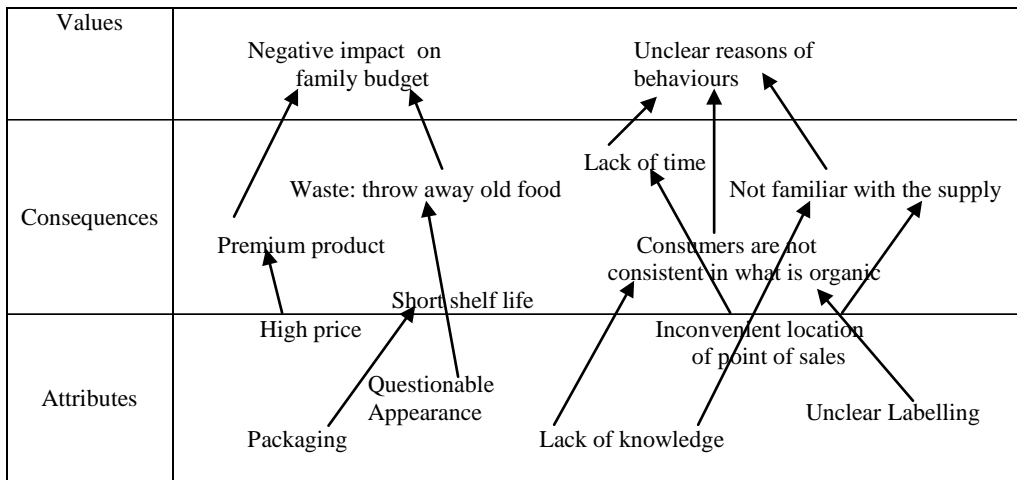
ly. Healthy and long life, feeling that you are doing the best you can to care for your child, happiness and inner harmony, environmental responsibility are the values of the mentioned consequences/benefits respectively. Further in Figure 3 and in Figure 4 motives and barriers for buying organic food are presented and proposed by laddering technique – hierarchical value map.



**Fig. 3.** Hierarchical value map of positive ladders (Source: Author)

The above framework is explaining how concrete attributes of the products (the means) are related to abstract personal values (the end) by eliciting the perceived consequences of these attributes for the consumer. Thus it helps practitioners to understand not only what is going on in consumers` heads, but also what is in their hearts, or *why* they do what they do.

Figure 4 below presents negative ladders or barriers to buying organic food.



**Fig. 4.** Hierarchical value map of negative ladders (Source: Author)

## 5. Conclusions

The results show that most Latvian consumers consider organic products as very healthy, of good quality and taste. However, these products are perceived as rather expensive and of questionable appearance. Consumers are not very familiar with the supply of organically grown products in the market. The resulting discussion highlights the importance of the associated internal and external factors within this area, and their impact for the decision-making process. In particular, consumers highly concerned on health and safety of food product and on friendlier with the environment production systems would be more willing to buy organic products. Means-end chain theory and laddering technique appear to be valuable for mapping consumer decision making process and providing advices for communication.

Laddering interviews provided deeper analysis on consumer decision making as this method helps to understand emotional tenor of the product from customer's perspective and highlight meanings that are difficult to assess directly. Understanding underlying customer values help marketers to tailor the messages and attach relevant attributes to products.

The findings have implications for practitioners for future sector-based communication to consumers and, potentially, for product development and labelling. It is suggested that marketing campaigns designed to increase organic food consumption should base messages on health-related values or end-states of being to resonate more effectively with consumers, like inner harmony, happiness, enjoyment, success and environmental responsibility.

The research is limited to baby food consumers and further research would be required to facilitate understanding of the consumer-decision making process with regard to organic products.

For academicians the findings have implications connected with application of means-end chain model and laddering technique. As valuable tool it can be applied to analyse consumer decision making in connection with other types of products including services, like education for example.

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