

Petteri Puska

Organic is the new black

Sending and interpreting reputational signals in
the context of organic food choices



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Julkaisun nimike Luomu on uusi musta: Maineellisten viestien lähettäminen ja tulkitseminen luomuruokien valintakontekstissa		
Tiivistelmä <p>Kuluttajat usein kertovat suosivansa luomuruokaa maukkauden, terveellisuuden ja eettisten seikkojen vuoksi. Luomua saatetaan kuitenkin suosia myös syistä, jotka ovat sosiaalisesti ei-hyväksytyjä ja tiedostamattomia. Kolmen artikkelin kautta väitöskirja pyrkii vastaamaan kysymykseen, mikä on luomuruoan kuluttamisen maineellinen signaaliarvo erilaisissa sosiaalisissa konteksteissa.</p> <p>Ensimmäinen artikkeli selvittää, miten statusmotiivin aktivoiminen vaikuttaa luomuruoan valintaan ja sen kokemiseen aistinvaraisesti. Kun mainehuolet oli aktivoitu, luomuvaihtoehtoja ei ainoastaan tehty enemmän, vaan luomuna tarjottu ruokanäyte myös maistui paremmalta. Toinen artikkeli tutkii luomuun liittyvää status-signaalointia mieskontekstissa. Urbanien miesten keskuudessa, muttei maaseutualueen, luomua suosivaa miestä kunnioitettiin ja kohdeltiin suotuisasti. Kolmas artikkeli tarkastelee luomukulutuksen sosiaalista signaaliarvoa erilaisissa kuluttajasegmenteissä. Eivät vain eettisiä arvoja vaalineet, vaan myös perinteisiä arvoja tärkeinä pitäneet kuluttajat mielsivät luomun suosijan prososiaalisiksi.</p> <p>Työn löydökset tuottavat uutta ymmärrystä prososiaalisen status-signaaloinnin ja vihreän kuluttamisen keskusteluihin. Tulokset osoittavat, että luomua ympäröi huomattavan vahva mainesymboliikka. Käytännössä, maineellisten aspektien korostaminen luomun myyntiympäristöissä saattaisi olla tehokas lähtökohta niiden menekin parantamiselle huolimatta korkeaksi mielletystä hinnasta.</p>		
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Abstract Consumers typically self-report favoring organic food because of tastiness, healthiness, and ethical nature. However, it is possible that they are also favored due to other motives that are socially disapproved of and nonconscious. Through three interlinked articles, the current thesis aims to shed light on the reputational signal value of organic food consumption in various social contexts. The first article examines how activating a nonconscious status-motive influences a preference for organic foods and their senso-emotional experience. When reputational concerns were primed salient, organic options were not only selected more but a food sample served as organic also tasted better. The second article investigates organic food-related status signaling in an intra-male context. Among urban males, but not among rural males, the pro-organic male status-signaler was perceived positively and even treated favorably. The third article explores the social signal value of organic food consumption among consumers with various worldviews. Intriguingly, both consumers who held strong ethical values and those who held conservatism values viewed a presumed organic food favorer as prosocial. The findings contribute to the literatures of prosocial status-signaling and green consumerism. In practice, the results indicate strong status symbolism associated with organic food consumption. Emphasizing reputational issues in their sales environments, for instance, may represent a potential starting-point in efforts to increase the sales of organic foods despite their high prices.		
Keywords Organic food, status signaling, prosociality, consumer image, evolutionary psychology, nonconscious behavior		

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On a dark, windy, and slushy day in Seinäjoki, on January 29,

Petteri Puska

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1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations has designated advancing sustainable consumption habits as one of the key objectives of the decade (United Nations, 2010). Our behavior as food consumers is one arena in which improvement is necessary; current food consumption and production are not at sustainable levels (Reisch, Eberle, & Lorek, 2013) and currently contribute to climate change and environmental degradation (see Thøgersen, 2017). In fact, food is one of the three consumption domains, together with housing and transportation that have the most significant impacts on the environment (cf. Steen-Olsen & Hertwich, 2015; Tukker, 2015). Transitioning toward organic food consumption would offer a more sustainable alternative to current patterns. Organic foods have a smaller impact on the environment because they have been produced through natural processes, making use of renewable energy sources and taking the protection of the soil and animal welfare into account (European Commission, 2017). Several studies have demonstrated the environmental benefits of organic foods as compared to their conventional counterparts (Scalco et al., 2017, p. 236)⁴.

However, steering consumers toward more sustainable choices is not an easy task. Specifically, although consumers typically possess generally positive attitudes toward sustainable options – their awareness of the state of the environment and self-reported willingness to pay for societally and environmentally sustainable products have increased as well (Tully & Winer, 2014) – they are only rarely willing to pay the price premiums required to purchase them (see Groening et al., 2018). In short, when money is at stake, consumers often decide not to go green. This holds for the realm of organic food. High prices are a well-known barrier to its increased consumption (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017; Magnusson et al., 2002; Padel & Foster, 2005). Other barriers that have often been mentioned include availability problems (e.g., Hjelmar, 2011) and a lack of clarity related to organic labels (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013).

As a result, the consumption of organic food has remained relatively low, even in the wealthiest parts of Europe and North America. In the world's leading "organic country" (Denmark), the share of food consumed accounted for by organic food

⁴ It must be stressed that the author of this work is fully aware of the very recent findings in the opposite direction concerning the environmental impacts of organic farming. According to Searchinger et al. (2018), due to the inefficacy of organic farming methods as compared to conventional ones (i.e., producing the same amount of food requires more hectares of space in the fields), its burden for the planet can sometimes be considerably higher. Specifically, in the case of certain products, such as winter wheat and green peas, organic farming can actually be significantly more harmful for the climate. That is, no claim is made that organically produced food is unequivocally a more sustainable alternative to conventionally produced food, only that significant evidence shows its environmental benefits and that in the minds of Western consumers, organic foods are generally perceived as green, prosocial options.

was 9.7% in 2016. Denmark was followed by Luxemburg (8.6%), Switzerland (8.4%), Austria (7.9%), and Sweden (7.9%) in this regard (Kaad-Hansen, 2017). In the US, according to the Organic Trade Association's organic industry survey, the corresponding share was little more than 5% in 2016 (OTA, 2017) – in Finland, where the thesis was completed, the current percentage is far less than three (Pro Luomu, 2018). In Eastern Europe and Asia, the share is about 1% at best (see Bryla, 2016; Hasimu, Marchesini, & Canavari, 2017). Although the share of organic food has steadily increased during recent years, becoming a multi-billion-dollar industry, this growth has remained moderate (Schrank & Running, 2018). That is, significant growth is not in sight. The critical question, then, is how to increase this share and more sustainable food consumption.

Why are organically produced foods favored? The most common purchase reasons self-reported by consumers include superior taste, healthiness, food safety, animal welfare, and environmental benefits (e.g., Boizot-Szantai, Hamza, & Soler, 2017; Hemmerling, Hamm, & Spiller, 2015; Hughner et al., 2007). The latter two can be considered to reflect prosocial, altruistic motives, whereas the former three are more selfish reasons (Kareklas, Carlson, & Muehling, 2014). The key claim of the current thesis is that this is not the entire story. In light of the recent understanding of green consumerism (see Groening et al., 2018, particularly in relation to social confirmation), it is possible that organic foods are also favored due to other motives, ones that may even be socially disapproved of and nonconscious.

To be more precise, the top purchase reasons for pro-environmental hybrid cars – also relatively expensive and considerably distinguished – have often been shown to be reputational (Maynard, 2007). In a similar vein, the primary motive for engaging in prosocial acts, such as charity donations (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013), volunteering (Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2010), or recycling (Schultz et al., 2007), has, in many cases, been demonstrated to be status signaling. Perhaps, the most illustrative example of this “prosocial status signaling” (i.e., attaining status through seemingly unselfish acts) is provided by the study of Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010). This study revealed that after the nonconscious status motives of the study participants were activated – inconsistent with traditional status-signaling views (see Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006) but in line with the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Roberts, 1998; Soler, 2012) – they preferred less luxurious green products over more luxurious non-green products across a wide range of product categories (cars, washing machines, table lamps, etc.). In other words, eliciting the desire for status led consumers to shy away from luxury and indulgence and choose an alternative that benefits their fellows as well.

The previous discussion leads to the question that is being pursued in this work via several perspectives and various experimental methods that are capable of tapping into both consumers' conscious and non-conscious decision-making processes: to what extent can prosocial status signaling – the “going green to be seen” effect – materialize in the mundane consumption context of organic food? There is a compelling need to investigate the social signal value of organic food consumption because this may help increase organic food's popularity despite the associated high prices. Price-cuts would undoubtedly boost sales of organic food (see Bezawada & Pauwels, 2013), as well as those of many other green goods, but due to the higher production costs of organic food, this is not typically possible.

In addition to practical importance, the topic is also intriguing from an academic point of view; very little is known about the social signaling function of everyday consumer perishables or smaller-price-tag choices in general (cf. Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012). In the organic food realm, understanding of this topic is not only very limited but also vague and even contradictory. Specifically, some studies hint that organic foods can go hand in hand with status considerations (Elliot, 2013; Kim, Lusk, & Brorsen, 2018), while others suggest that these mundane goods are shopped for as effortlessly and automatically as their conventionally produced alternatives (Thøgersen, Jørgensen, & Sandager, 2012). Furthermore, even in modern Western societies, where sustainable consumption is generally viewed as prosocial, there are many consumers who do not appreciate organic production methods (Bellows, Alcaraz, & Hallman, 2010). Through three interlinked articles – containing empirical sections and applying both evolutionary (see Durante & Griskevicius, 2018; Saad, 2017) and socio-cultural insights – the current thesis aims to shed light on the true reputational signal value of favoring organic food.

Below, the purpose, objectives, positioning, and intended contributions of the work are defined in more detail.

1.1 Purpose and objectives of the dissertation

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling related to sending and interpreting reputational messages in the context of organic food choices. To be more precise, the *purpose of the work* is to thoroughly and critically evaluate the extent to which and the ways in which consumers' prosocial status signaling manifests itself through favoring organic food, as reflected in product choices, purchase intentions, consumer impressions, behavior implications, and more physiology-driven sensory-level food experiences. This purpose will be met by achieving through following three objectives.

The first objective is to create a conceptual framework based on an extensive literature review to understand prosocial status signaling in the organic food context. *The second objective* is to empirically analyze the extent to which consumers' non-consciously activated status motives influence their organic food choices, purchase intentions, and senso-emotional experiences (signal sender perspective). *The third objective* is to empirically analyze – with implicit and explicit methods – the extent to which and the ways in which organic food consumption can act as a prosocial status signal related to perceptual inferences and treatment (signal interpreter perspective).

1.2 Positioning and intended academic contributions of the dissertation

The thesis has its roots in the consumer research domain of marketing (see Simonson et al., 2001). Specifically, it operates in the realms of prosocial behavior, organic food consumption, and status signaling. In short, *prosocial behavior* refers to individuals' long-term focused actions that are intended to benefit others (as compared to self-interested origins and a short-term focus) (cf. Griskevicius, Cantu, & Van Vugt, 2012). *Organic*, in turn, is a prosocial form of food that is produced while avoiding the use of man-made chemicals and taking animals' health and well-being into account (European Commission, 2017). *Status signaling*, in turn, refers to ones' behaviors (e.g., favoring products, brands, and services with certain symbolic connotations) intended to attain respect among peers (cf. Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). Fundamentally, the term "signaling" refers to an action whose main goal is to transmit some information about oneself to others (cf. Connelly et al., 2011). In addition to status (Dubois et al., 2012; Otterbring et al., 2018), identities (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008) and nonconformity (Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2013) – just to name a few – can be signaled through consumption. Although these all are heavily studied themes in the field of consumer research, status considerations have rarely been mentioned together with organic food consumption (e.g., Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix, 2014; Fifita et al., 2019). The novelty of the current work is its examination of this connection.

With regard to more general contributions, the inter-disciplinary nature of the work cannot be ignored. Although its roots are in the consumer research domain, many insights are adopted from the fields of evolutionary psychology, social psychology, evolutionary ethology, and sociology, not to mention a number of more food-specific domains, such as sensory and emotional research. The intent of the author of this work to reach out to the nonconscious processes of human behavior represents another general contribution. It is now known that a

significant component of consumer behavior is guided by deeply ingrained and potentially non-conscious cornerstone tendencies (see Durante & Griskevicius, 2018; Saad, 2017), and socially disapproved of desire for status is suggested to be among these (see Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015). In fact, some evolutionarily minded social scientists have suggested that the selection pressure of evolution has shaped our brains to be particularly sensitive to status considerations (see Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). However, many consumer researchers tend to ignore these fundamental drivers, which can engender nonconscious acts, when attempting to understand status-seeking behaviors.

Furthermore, a considerable amount of the consumer research, even in the organic food realm, is still carried out via explicit methods (i.e., by asking study informants to provide information directly). This is not necessarily desirable. Such methods are not only incapable of uncovering nonconscious behaviors but also susceptible to a number of response biases. Green product surveys, in particular, have a strong potential for biased responses (Groening et al., 2018). In contrast, the current work relies on more implicit methods, such as priming (e.g., Romero & Craig, 2017). In the food context, the use of such methods is highly justified because according to Köster (2009), the majority of food- and eating-related behaviors occur automatically based on intuitive reasoning. In their thought-provoking study, Raghunathan, Walker-Naylor, and Hoyer (2006) demonstrate that sometimes, implicit and explicit beliefs related to the same food object may be contradictory and even produce different behavioral outcomes. Moreover, studying status signaling necessitates that indirect methods be applied because such signaling is not socially approved of in most cases and, thus, many Western consumers will not admit to engaging in such if asked directly (see Sørtheix & Lönnqvist, 2014).

Regarding its more specific contributions, this work aims to extend the current status signaling literature in several ways. First, this research domain has traditionally suggested, on the one hand, that the signaling occurs through luxury brands, premium priced consumer durables, and other “conspicuous goods and services” and, on the other hand, that openly selfish motives such as self-indulgence are the main drivers of these behaviors (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2013; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Mazzocco et al., 2012). Much less attention has been devoted to prosocial status signaling, meaning that respect among one’s fellows is being pursued through seemingly self-sacrificing, altruistic acts, such as by favoring, for example, sustainable options (Griskevicius et al., 2010). However, signaling prosociality through everyday choices, such as organic food perishables, is virtually unknown phenomenon in the status signaling literature. This thesis aims to fill in this gap.

Second, the vast majority of previous status signaling studies have been conducted from the perspective of the sender of the signal. Much less understanding has been accumulated regarding the interpretation of the status signal (see Lee, Baumgartner, & Winterich, 2018; Scott, Mende, & Bolton, 2013). For this reason, in two out of the three articles of the dissertation, the focus is on the interpretation of the prosocial status signal, instead of the sending of such signals. Third, the current consumer research has treated status-signaling as a more or less ungendered phenomenon. Given the fact, for example, that men are inclined to signal their mate value to women through material possessions and luxury goods (Sundie et al., 2011) and that women are capable of reading these signals as intended (Lens et al., 2012), this seems delimiting. In this work, which is grounded on evolutionary research, the sex dynamics of this type of signaling are taken into account. Specifically, a previously unexplored phenomenon is examined: prosocial status signaling between males.

Fourth, it has recently been found that status signaling can create real-life behavioral benefits for an actor, such as greater compliance with a request. However, very few such studies have concentrated on luxury brands (Lee, Ko, & Megehee, 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). The current work will attempt to determine whether less ostentatious organic food perishables equipped with much smaller price tags carry corresponding behavioral implications. Taken together, the broader purpose of the previous four pieces is to expand the costly signaling theory (Zahavi, 1975). To be more precise, the question of whether non-luxurious everyday consumption behaviors, such as organic food choices (counterintuitively and counter to prior understanding), qualify as costly signals of prosociality – a highly valued underlying quality of an individual across cultures and time periods (see Soler, 2012) – is the focal, novel academic question that is pursued throughout the work both theoretically and empirically.

In addition to the literature on status signaling, this dissertation also aims to contribute to the research on motivational (goal-directed) priming (see Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014). Although the activation of a non-conscious consumption motive, such as respect, health, or sustainability, can create a variety of subsequent food- and eating-related responses (see Dubois et al., 2012; Ohtomo, 2017; Tate, Stewart, & Daly, 2014), these insights are conducted mainly at the level of the evaluative or behavioral domains. By investigating whether status motivational priming can also create more physiology-driven (i.e., affective), sensory level food reactions, this work seeks to provide a novel contribution to the extensive literature on this research topic.

Finally, it must be stressed that although this thesis deals solely with organic food consumption, this is understood as only a part of a broader realm of prosocial consumption, especially green consumption. Green consumerism is a heavily studied phenomenon. It has been approached primarily in terms of values, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, and reputational aspects (Groening et al., 2018). This vast research concludes that mainstreaming greener consumption habits is difficult. In addition to the price premium barrier, even objective environmental knowledge may not necessarily translate into sustainable purchasing behavior (e.g., Vicente-Molina, Fernández-Sáinz, & Izagirre-Olaizola, 2013). Fundamentally, this the work aims to contribute by adopting the “status-signaling approach” – beyond the organic food context – in examining prosocial, green consumption. The discussion chapter deals with this issue more detail at the end of the dissertation.

As for the intended article-specific novelty value, Paper 1 examines the extent to which activating a non-conscious consumption motive affects organic food choices and the associated senso-emotional experience. The integration of ideas from motivational priming (see Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014), costly signaling (e.g., Soler, 2012), (in)congruity accounts (e.g., Allen, Gupta, & Monnier, 2008, Sirgy, 1982, 2018), and food-elicited emotion theories (see Thomson, 2007; Thomson, Crocker, & Marketo, 2010) in the mundane consumption context of organic food (Thøgersen et al., 2012) represents the conceptual contribution of the first paper.

In an intra-sex context, Paper 2 examines the extent to which favoring organic food is viewed as a prosocial status signal in distinct socio-cultural environments. The fusion of ideas derived from costly signaling, parochial altruism (e.g., Bernhard, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2006), socio-cultural theories (see Chao & Schor, 1998), and research on intra-male competition (e.g., Buss, 1988; Otterbring et al., 2018) in the mundane consumption context of organic food represents the conceptual contribution of the second paper.

Paper 3 examines the ability of organic food consumption to confer socially valued characteristics in various consumer segments. The synthesis of ideas from Schwartz’s value theory (1992, 1994, 2006, 2010, 2012), the value-attitude-behavior hierarchies (see Thøgersen, Zhou, & Huang, 2016, p. 215), (in)congruity accounts, and research on prosocial status signaling (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010) in the mundane consumption context of organic food represents the conceptual contribution of the third paper. The common innovative feature of the articles is their attempt to integrate insights from evolutionary and socio-culturally driven research disciplines.

2 CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

In this chapter, the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling is captured by taking the organic food context into account. First, the essence of the term “status” and its relationship to closely-related concepts is defined. Then, the capability of certain consumption choices to confer socially valued characteristics (i.e., to act as vehicles for status signaling) is discussed. After that, a more in-depth look at some of the well-acknowledged conceptualizations explaining symbolic and status-driven consumption is provided; the theory of costly signaling (Zahavi, 1975) and the continuum model of consumer impression formation (Fiske, Lin, & Neuberg, 1999) are examined in more detail. Then, plausible manifestations of prosocial status signaling are examined, acknowledging the role of certain moderators – this is preceded by a brief overview of the essence of prosocial consumption and the fundamentals of content priming. Lastly, a conceptual framework dealing with the conscious and non-conscious behaviors – as well as perspectives of sending and interpreting – involved in consumers’ prosocial status signaling via organic food consumption is created.

2.1 Relationship between one’s status and consumption choices

2.1.1 Defining status

Researchers from distinct disciplines have suggested (e.g., Kenrick et al., 2010; Maslow, 1943) that people have a fundamental need to be respected and appreciated in the eyes of their fellows (i.e., to possess status). According to evolutionarily minded scholars, people developed a motivation to pursue high status because it has been shown to provide survival and reproductive benefits throughout evolutionary history (e.g., Buss, 2008; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In fact, this concept can be extended beyond the human race: having a high status is known to increase ones’ fitness among many social species (see Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). Even without evolutionary accounts, status differences seem to exist in every human social environment (see Leavitt, 2005; Von Rueden, 2014). In general, individuals with high status are often favorably perceived and treated, receiving positive social attention and numerous other benefits, which, in turn, improves their opportunities for obtaining leading positions and control over scarce resources (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

What, then, does the term “status” actually mean? There is no single correct definition. Rather, the meaning is dependent on the context in question (medicine,

culture, or a phase of a process). In social interactions between people, however, this term always refers to “an individual’s social rank or standing relative to others within a group or a society” (see Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999, p. 42). This relative position, which is voluntarily afforded by the other members of the peer group, can be termed “prestige.” In the current work, status is explicitly understood as prestige – it originates from individuals’ social perceptions and judgments.

According to Anderson et al. (2015), social theorists tend to agree that status, understood as prestige, involves three central elements. First, it includes respect and admiration in the sense that individuals afforded high status are highly regarded and esteemed by others (e.g., Leary et al., 2014). Second, status involves voluntary respect (e.g., Kemper, 1990). That is, people afford higher status to another individual by voluntarily complying with that individual’s wishes and giving that person privileged access to scarce resources and thus elevating him or her to a higher social position than one’s own (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

The third key feature of prestige is so-called “instrumental social value” (see Leary et al., 2014). Specifically, status is given to someone when this person appears to possess features that can help accomplish one’s own goals. In short, prestige can more formally be conceptualized as “the respect, admiration, and voluntary deference an individual is afforded by others, based on that individual’s perceived instrumental social value” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 2). Status, when understood in this way, has also been described using the term “sociometric status” (see Anderson et al., 2012).

Status is closely related to but also critically different from concepts such as power, dominance, social belongingness, and socio-economic status (see Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3–4). “Power” can be defined as the ability to influence others through resource control or punishment (e.g., Fiske, 1993). Although power and status are similar in many ways, clear differences can be observed. First, power is based on control over resources. Status, on the other hand, is based on the social perception of personal characteristics that can provide value. Second, power is based on force, while status is based on voluntary respect. In a nutshell, people with high status are respected because they are wanted, but people with high power are respected because others have to (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3; see also Dubois et al., 2012). Naturally, when an individual is operating in a position of formal authority (e.g., foreman at a workplace), these concepts often go hand in hand.

“Dominance” refers to fear, coercion, and other intimidating actions intended to achieve rank and influence (Cheng & Tracy, 2014); thus, it is a bit like power. Sometimes, dominance has been associated with one’s status (see Griskevicius &

Kenrick, 2013). Recently, however, scholars have increasingly begun to investigate dominance as a separate way to gain influence (e.g., Cheng et al., 2013) because unlike status or prestige, which is based on instrumental social value, dominance originates from forced compliance (see Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3).

The third similar concept is “social belongingness.” This refers to the extent to which individuals are liked and approved of by others (Leary et al., 2014). The major difference between the two terms is that whereas status is a vertical or hierarchical concept (i.e., people are being ranked above or below one another), belongingness is non-hierarchical concept. According to Hogan (1983), status refers to “getting ahead,” while belongingness refers to “getting along.” Their prerequisites differ as well. Belongingness is created by what Leary et al. (2014) describe as “relational value.” This concept is related to the psychological and emotional significance of relationships, and instrumental value (the third central feature of prestige), which can help in accomplishing goals, may thus be less important. In other words, even though people with high status are often well-liked, people with lower status may be as or even more liked in a given group or society (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 3).

Lastly, high status goes often hand in hand with one’s income, level of education, and occupation. However, from a technical point of view, such status is referred to as “socioeconomic status” (Adler et al., 1994). Instead, status (prestige) consists the level of respect and voluntary deference individuals are afforded by fellow people and is based on social inferences of one’s instrumental social value. That is, they can be unrelated if the income and education are not associated with instrumental social value in a peer group. Nevertheless, socioeconomic status is often a prerequisite for prestige because financial success and education are highly socially valued, thus communicating an individual’s competence and intelligence (see Anderson et al., 2015, p. 4).

To conclude, the concept of (social) status can be understood in various ways. In this work, however, it is understood as prestige (i.e., a relatively higher position in a peer group hierarchy afforded by other members of that group through voluntary respect). For conceptual clarity, henceforth, the term “status” is primarily used to describe one’s level of prestige – this is a common practice in the field of consumer research (cf. Dubois et al., 2012; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). One central insight, for the purposes of the current thesis, is that consumption choices can affect one’s social status. This issue is tackled below.

2.1.2 Consumption choices as indicators of one's status

Status-driven consumption (in one form or another) is probably one of the most heavily studied topics in the consumer research domain. More than a century ago, Thorstein Veblen (1899) suggested, in his seminal work *Theory of the Leisure Class*, that people have a tendency to conspicuously display their possessions to others. Since then, conspicuous consumption (e.g., Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010; Mason, 1981; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), status consumption (e.g., Eastman et al., 1999; Truong et al., 2008), prestige-seeking consumption (e.g., Vigneron & Johnson, 1999), and the symbolic consumption of goods and services have extensively been researched by scholars with various paradigmatic perspectives (e.g., Belk, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Holt, 1998; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001).

The vast majority of current research suggests that consumers (either consciously or non-consciously) use luxury brands, premium-priced consumer durables, and similar conspicuous products in their status-signaling efforts (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2013; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Ward & Dahl, 2014). In fact, it has been estimated that within certain industries (e.g., fashion and jewelry), concerns over status are the most important force affecting the market, and according to recent reports, these markets are worth hundreds of billions euros and are still growing (Deloitte, 2017; Statista, 2018).

The existing research also typically concludes that openly selfish drivers, such as self-indulgence (cf. materialism), motivate people to send status signals through consumption choices (e.g., Mazzocco et al., 2012; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009; Scott et al., 2013). The research has also identified many consumer-specific and contextual moderators of status signaling, such as age (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), sex (see Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2013), race (Charles, Hurst, & Roussanov, 2009), need for status (Dubois et al., 2012; Han et al., 2010, Wilcox, Kim, & Sen, 2009; see also Lee & Shrum, 2012), and the social visibility of the consumption situation (e.g., Eastman et al., 1999; Thompson & Norton, 2011).

To illustrate some of these moderators in more detail, the super-rich and consumers with old money are inclined to use silent brands – those recognizable only to their in-group members – in their status-driven consumption activities (Han et al., 2010, see also Berger & Ward, 2010). Young consumers, in turn, are generally more prone to favor goods and services due to the status value they confer (Eastman & Eastman, 2011; Truong et al., 2008). When it comes to sex, typical status-signaling vehicles for men are expensive and distinguishable durable goods (Segal & Podoshen, 2013), such as cars (see Macesich, 2014), while women often rely on fashion (e.g., designer apparels and bags) and cosmetics (Chao &

Schor, 1998). The fundamental motives for sending a status signal through a consumption choice may also differ between the sexes (see Durente et al., 2014; Hennighausen et al., 2014; Janssens et al., 2011; Otterbring et al., 2018; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014).

It is also widely acknowledged that people are capable of drawing status-related inferences about their fellows (e.g., concerning their levels of wealth and prestige) based on consumption choices and possessions (e.g., Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Bellezza et al., 2013; Burroughs, Drews, & Hallman, 1991; Lee et al., 2018; Richins, 1994; Solomon, 1983). In Nelissen and Meijers (2011), for example, wearing a luxury branded shirt (as compared to an almost identical non-luxury branded shirt) elicited more intense feelings of respect and affluence in the minds of observers. Similar effects have also been obtained in other studies regarding premium-branded clothes (see Lee et al., 2015). In the same way, regarding mobile impression billboards (i.e., cars), owning a premium priced product from a certain German or Italian manufacturer may be more likely to confer high social status than owning a regularly priced product, for example, from a certain Japanese or French manufacturer (cf. Chesterfield, 2017).

In addition to these perceptual inferences, witnessing conspicuous status signaling can stir up actual behavioral responses in the observer. Classic studies show that people do not honk as quickly after a traffic light turns green if the car in front of them seems to be more expensive than their own (Doob & Gross, 1968). In a similar vein, Fennis (2008) revealed that when confronted with a person displaying luxury-branded items, the research subject adopted a submissive posture. Perhaps the most illustrative example of the behavioral implications of favoring premium-priced brand is provided by the previously mentioned paper of Nelissen and Meijers (2011). A person wearing a Tommy Hilfiger shirt was not only perceived as more respected and affluent but also treated more favorably in a variety of ways as compared to an almost identical control person (e.g., the reception of larger charity donations, greater compliance with a request, and a better chance of being hired to a job). Luxury brands and products with higher price tags (i.e., traditional status-signaling vehicles) thus possess a powerful communication function.

However, social status can also be signaled through less ostentatious choices. Indeed, recently evidence has indicated “prosocial status signaling,” meaning that status is attained through seemingly unselfish acts, such as volunteering (Bereczkei et al., 2010), recycling (Schultz et al., 2007), donating to charity (Ariely et al., 2009; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013), or favoring sustainable products (Griskevicius et al., 2010). For instance, when the *New York Times* reported, based

on a large survey, the top motives for buying the environmentally friendly, easily identifiable, and relatively expensive hybrid Prius, concern for the environment was last on that list. In contrast, the number one purchase reason was that the car “makes a statement about its owner.” Such a car sends the message that the owner is not a selfish individual but a prosocial one, who cares about the welfare of others (Maynard, 2007). In a similar vein, the luxury car maker Lexus’s decision to start the pricing of its hybrid model at more than USD 100,000 was not seen as a good move by many experts. However, sales exceeded projections by hundreds of percent (Ramsey, 2007). Today, conspicuously green, trendy, and ultra-expensive Teslas are perhaps the most obvious targets for similarly motivated behaviors (Von Drehle, 2018).

The most illustrative case-in-point regarding prosocial status signaling is, however, provided by Griskevicius et al. (2010). This study revealed that after the non-conscious status motives of the study participants were elucidated, they preferred – inconsistent with traditional status-signaling views (see Mandel et al., 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006) but in line with the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Roberts, 1998; Soler, 2012) – less luxurious green options over more luxurious non-green options across a wide range of product categories. Intriguingly, the “going green to be seen” effect emerged only when green options were more expensive than non-green options. Indications of consumers’ willingness to pay for the “green signal” and their status-motivated desire to display austerity rather than ostentation have been found in many recent studies (e.g., Delgado, Harriger, & Khanna, 2015; Elliot, 2013; Sexton & Sexton, 2014; Van der Wal, Van Horen, & Grinstein, 2016).

Much like more luxurious choices, prosocial choices also can confer impressions related to social status. To illustrate this, consumers purchasing pro-environmental products are generally perceived as more cooperative, altruistic and ethical – socially valued characteristics in most cultures – than those consumers who prefer conventional products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). More broadly, high status is commonly associated with prosociality and environmental friendliness (see De Nardo et al., 2017).

In summary, it is well-documented that consumption choices, whether they be materialistic or more prosocial, can confer social status (i.e., they can be used as vehicles for status signaling). In Chapter 2.2.2, an explanatory model is provided. Before that, key points from certain classic conceptualizations are used to illustrate the symbolic communication function of consumption (for oneself and significant others) more generally – consumers’ choices and identity-related issues (both

personal and social) are inseparably linked (see Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008; Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; McCracken, 1986; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

2.2 Theories dealing with symbolic and status-driven consumption

2.2.1 Identity construction through consumption choices

When operating in the realm of symbolic consumption (including status-motivated choices), one's perceptions of oneself and others cannot be ignored. Indeed, identity-based consumption has produced a considerable amount of empirical research during the past six decades (see Reed et al., 2012). The concept of identity can be defined in slightly different ways across disciplines, but generally, it refers to dynamic perceptions of oneself as individual, actor, and group member (cf. Stets, 2006). It is common to make a division between personal identity and social identity. In many cases, the latter is the dominant form (Hitlin, 2003; Reed, 2002).

Personal identity consists of those features that differentiate an individual from others. It is a kind of "sum of all self-perceptions" and is particularly evident in bilateral interactions (cf. Hitlin, 2003). However, when operating in larger groups, social identity is the dominant form (i.e., the features shared with that group). Specifically, social identity refers to that part of an individual's self-perception that is determined by his or her group memberships; fundamentally, it is about self-identification (cf. Chan et al., 2012). Because people can belong to several groups at the same time, they can also possess many social self-identifications (e.g., I am a "business academic," I am a "man," and I am "pro-organic") – the social context, then, determines what is currently the important self-identification, affecting consumption behaviors accordingly.

The previous points are a central part of the social identity theory (SIT). The SIT is a classic conceptualization that attempts to explain conflict between groups as a function of group-based self-definitions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It has been developed in the field of social psychology, but its insights have also been applied to understanding consumption-related behaviors (cf. Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008). The theory is grounded on classical assumptions about a society composed of hierarchically diverse, competing social groups (e.g., sexes and religions) that have power and status relationships with one another; these "categories" create their members' social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Formally, the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) begins with the premise that people define their own identities (cf. self-concepts) through social groups and that such identifications function to protect and boost self-identity. The emergence of group identities necessitates both the categorization of one's "in-group" in relation to an "out-group" and the tendency to see one's own group in a positively biased way relative to the out-group. The outcome is identification with a collective, depersonalized identity that is based on the membership of the group and loaded with positive meanings (see Turner et al., 1987 – "self-categorization").

In practice, feelings of group membership can be based on very trivial symbols and acts (e.g., the flip of a coin, as in Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In fact, nearly five decades ago in his classic experiments with minimal groups, Tajfel (1970) showed that an awareness of belonging to a group alone is sufficient to engender discrimination for the benefit of the "in-group" – no prior competition or conflict of interest was needed. This bimodal categorization caused by social identity perceptions has since been studied with regard to a number of socially important phenomena, such as stereotyping (e.g., Smith, 1999) and the non-allocation of resources to out-group members (e.g., Sidanius, Pratto, & Mitchell, 1994). For this work, these insights are relevant because consumption choices are highly effective in providing hints to others about one's social identity (cf. Chan et al., 2012), leading to potential in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination.

As for consumer-research-specific theories, the relationship between one's identity and consumption can be viewed through the lens of extended-self theory. This is a seminal conceptualization, presented by Russell Belk (1988), of the relationship between consumers and their possessions, particularly in terms how we incorporate things, persons, and places into our personal identities. The classic statement presented in the theory that "we are what we have" is perhaps the most fundamental phrase – and, at the same time, possibly the most challenging to refute – in the field of consumer research.

In the nutshell, according to Belk (1988), consumption helps people to define who they are, functioning simultaneously as a signal to others for impression formation purposes. It is suggested in the theory that consumers use their key possessions – knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally – to extend, expand, and strengthen their sense of self. Several examples are shown to illustrate how the phenomenon takes place and in which contexts; premium-priced goods – closely related to status signaling – and gift-giving, for example, are inextricably linked with the extended self. It is noteworthy that Belk (1988) uses the terms "self," "sense of self," and "identity" as synonyms describing the way in which the consumer subjectively perceives himself or herself.

The key premise of the theory is that consumers possess a so-called “core-self” that is expanded to include items that then become parts of their “extended-self”. To be more precise, following Belk (1988, 2013), “body, internal processes, ideas, and experiences” are likely to be part of the core-self, while “persons, places, and things (cf. consumption choices) to which one feels attached” are more likely to be seen as part of the extended-self.” According to Belk (1988), material objects most clearly make up the extended-self. Other people, on the other hand, are both building blocks of the self and potentially “objects” that form part of the extended-self (e.g., name dropping to increase one’s own status). One key point of this mode of thinking is that the ever-changing self also involves various levels of group affiliation, which may include family, neighborhood, and nation.

Although Belk’s (1988) insights that 1) identity-related issues are central to consumption and 2) possessions are inseparably part of the self are evergreen basic facts in the domain of consumer research, 30 years ago, the consumption realm was very different. Social media, for example, did not exist. As a result, Belk (2013) has updated the extended-self theory to include our new digital reality, which has created entirely new ways of perceiving ourselves. Inspired by the original theory, several conceptualizations of the consumer’s identity-related sensemaking via consumption have arisen (see Ahuvia, 2005). For instance, it is now common to view the “construction of self as a narrative” (i.e., a consumer’s identity is more than a list of attributes; it is a single large story stored in the memory). Fournier’s (1998) work on brand relationships provides an extensively cited example of this train of thought.

Another classic theory developed in the consumer research field that can be used to view identity-based consumption is Sirgy’s (1982) self-congruity theory. In a nutshell, the theory suggests that consumers prefer goods with symbolic meanings that are in line with their self-concepts. More formally (Sirgy, 2018, p. 198), self-congruity is a psychological process and outcome wherein consumers compare their perceptions of a brand’s image (more specifically, the brand’s personality or the image of its user) with their own self-concepts (e.g., the actual self, ideal self, and social self). To illustrate, consumers may perceive organic food as ethical (Mazar & Zhong, 2010), and if they feel themselves to be ethical, there is a match between the two (i.e., high self-congruity). On the other hand, if organic food is seen as ethical but individuals do not perceive themselves as ethical, there will be a mismatch between the two (i.e., low self-congruity). This train of thought belongs to a broader cognitive consistency theory-class suggesting that people seek consistency with their beliefs and behaviors because inconsistency produces feelings of unpleasantness and tension (see Allen et al., 2008).

The theory's key assumption is that consumers possess not one self-concept (commonly understood as one's actual self-image) but at least three others: the ideal self-image, the social self-image, and the ideal social self-image (Sirgy, 1982). From the perspective of the current work, the latter two are particularly relevant. The former refers to how consumers actually see themselves. The ideal self-image, in turn, refers to how consumers would like to see themselves, or what they would like to become (this manifestation of the self reflects the features that the individual wishes to possess). The social self-image is the way in which consumers believe they are seen by their significant others. The ideal social self-image, in turn, is a perception of how consumers would like to be viewed by their significant others (Sirgy, 2018, p. 199). These four forms of consumer self-concept are activated when consumers assess goods and services in the marketplace. In other words, they serve as reference points when assessing the relative desirability of an item (e.g., a product or brand user image).

During past decades, it has been shown that self-congruity (actual, ideal, social, and ideal social) impacts consumers' behaviors in a variety of ways (see Aguirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012). These behaviors include both pre-purchase behaviors (e.g., product attitudes, brand preferences, willingness to pay, and actual choice) and post-purchase behaviors (e.g., product satisfaction, brand loyalty and trust, and word-of-mouth communication). In the realm of jewelry brands, self-congruity has been found to be a strong predictor of consumers' brand preferences and satisfaction (Jamal & Goode, 2001). In the retail context, in turn, congruity between one's self-concept and a store's brand image has been shown to lead to more positive product and store attitudes (d'astous & Levesque, 2003). Moreover, self-congruity directly increases product involvement (Kressmann et al., 2006) and reduces the attractiveness of alternatives (Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007).

According to this theory, the significant impact of self-congruity on consumers' behavior is caused by the fact that congruity leads to the fulfillment of the self-concepts' needs. Naturally, needs differ between self-concepts. It has been suggested that actual self-congruity is motivated by a need for self-consistency, ideal self-congruity is motivated by the need for self-esteem, social self-congruity by the need for social consistency, and ideal social self-congruity by the need for social approval (Sirgy, 2018, p. 200). As stated above, the current consumer research supports (in)congruity effects on the part of all four forms of self. This dissertation adopts insights from self-congruity theory in its later sections.

To conclude, like Belk's (1988) theory of the extended-self, Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory also deals with the interplay between ones' identity perceptions and consumption choices. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) SIT, on the other hand,

tackles this issue at a more general level. They both deliver the same basic message: consumption choices matter because they signal valuable information about the actor to important others (his or her “tastes” and group memberships). In addition to the three seminal theories presented, there are number of conceptualizations (both domain-specific and more general) that can be used to understand the relationship between the consumer and his or her choices. For the current work, the relevance of one is greater than the others: the theory of costly signaling (Zahavi, 1975). This evolutionarily driven conceptualization – highlighting the role of social status – is discussed below in detail, taking the organic food context into account.

2.2.2 The theory of costly signaling

The relationship between ones’ social status and consumption choices – both self-indulgent and prosocial choices – can be viewed and explained through the lens of the costly signaling theory. This theory was originally developed for ethological research (Zahavi, 1975), but recently, it has been applied in understanding wasteful human displays, as well as the realm of business studies, including consumer research (e.g., DiDonato & Jakubiak, 2016; Otterbring et al., 2018). Accordingly, seemingly costly behavior (in terms of time, money, energy, or risk, as in the *handicap principle*) may serve as a reliable signal of desirable individual qualities (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997). The peacock’s tail is a classic example of a costly signal. At first glance, it appears to be detrimental in regard to predators (i.e., giving a handicap). Nevertheless, by supporting it, the peacock seems to be capable of confronting these enemies, which, in turn, increases its desirability among peahens, thus improving its mating chances (Zahavi, 1975). In short, the peacock’s tail is wasteful at the first sight, but ultimately beneficial.

Similarly, it has been shown that favoring consumption goods can serve as a costly signal. For consumption – or any given behavioral strategy – to function as a costly signal, four criteria must to be met. The signal must be 1) observable, 2) costly to produce (i.e., hard to fake), 3) associated with social status, and 4) ultimately beneficial to its sender (see Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). Nelissen and Meijers (2011) have shown that luxury products meet these criteria. As stated above, wearing a globally well-known (Criterion 1) and relatively expensive (Criterion 2) luxury-branded shirt not only stirred up intense perceptions of socially highly valued traits (Criterion 3) but also created positive behavioral implications for its user (Criterion 4). Drawing from the same theory, Lee et al. (2015) practically replicated these findings in different cultural contexts and with a greater focus on intersex interactions.

However, costly signaling is not always about displaying more traditional resources (cf. wealth) through luxury consumption. Favoring sustainable products can also be viewed as a costly signal (Griskevicius et al., 2010). In such cases, the primary trait associated with the signal is not affluence – although sustainable products are often more expensive than conventional products (see Rana & Paul, 2017) – but rather altruism (cf. prosociality), which has been a socially highly valued characteristic across time periods and cultures, just like the wealth. Specifically, people with prosocial reputation are generally perceived as more desirable friends, leaders, allies, and even romantic partners (see Arnocky et al., 2017; Kafasha et al., 2014).

Considering these benefits of a prosocial reputation, one might think that people would actually compete to be seen as being as prosocial as possible. This has happened among all social species (including humans) throughout evolutionary history and is known as *competitive altruism* (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Soler, 2012). Costly signaling via sustainable, prosocial products can be understood using this perspective. Specifically, the costly signal transmitted in the form of altruism communicates that the person is not a selfish individual but a prosocial one who possess resources (cf. wealth) and a willingness to sacrifice them for the benefit of others (cf. Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005).

One of the key premises of the current dissertation is that organic food confers prosocial status symbolism because favoring it can be viewed as a costly signaling trait. In fact, demonstrating this is the major intended academic contribution of the work. However, the four criteria for costly signaling stated above must be met. It is noteworthy that Griskevicius et al. (2010) did not actually test the extent to which these criteria are met in the case of sustainable consumption. As for the first criterion (i.e., visibility), organic foods meet this criterion because they are equipped with distinctive labels (Van der Wal et al., 2016), are becoming mainstream globally (Shang & Pelozo, 2016), and possess unique brand value (Ellison et al., 2016).

They also meet the second criterion (i.e., being costly to yield and difficult to fake). The price premium that consumers pay for organic foods makes them prototypical examples of costly signals (Rana & Paul, 2017). For example, in the major supermarkets in the UK, it has been calculated that organic food is, on average, 89% more expensive than conventionally produced food (Beer, 2016). It is important to highlight that a costly signal need be nothing but relatively more expensive (cf. Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011), meaning that displays of more mundane goods, even food products, can meet this criterion (cf. Dubois et al., 2012). Furthermore, because the availability of organic foods is, in

many cases, more limited than that of conventional foods (Hjelmar, 2011), consumers may have to sacrifice a considerable amount of time and energy to find them. Organic food production is also strictly regulated (i.e., there are hardly any cheaper forgeries with better availability).

The third criterion of a costly signal is that it must be associated with some unobservable yet desirable quality of an individual, such as good genes, physical health, or another socially highly valued trait. This criterion implies that socially valued traits, by definition (Hyman, 1942), increase one's status. As stated above, it is assumed here that the general status-enhancing traits that people associate with a person making sustainable consumer choices (favoring organic food) are primarily altruism but also wealth. This is tested empirically in the later parts of the work.

According to the final criterion, a costly signal should ultimately be beneficial (i.e., yield a fitness benefit) to its sender. This benefit is derived from the effects of signaling about one's habit of favoring organic foods on the behavior of the signal receivers. This criterion will also be tested empirically (i.e., to determine whether signal receivers treat a signal sender – a favorer of organic foods – differently in comparison to a non-favorer, irrespective of the other characteristics of that person). In any case, favoring organic food appears to meet the four criteria for a costly signal. That is, organic foods (i.e., everyday perishables) can be used – just like more luxurious goods – to signal ones' underlying qualities (cf. prosocial status).

How and through what kind of mental processes is this (supposedly costly) signal decoded and interpreted by its observers? In other words, how is the image of a person who is signaling his/her status through organic food consumption formed? The consumer impression formation model created by Fiske et al. (1999) can be helpful in shedding light on this issue. This continuum model is designed to describe different ways in which people form impressions of others, while acknowledging that all these ways share certain fundamental processes.

2.2.3 Impression formation process of consumer image

In the current thesis, the application of the continuum model is based on two postulations. First, just like the previously mentioned luxury brands (e.g., Tommy Hilfiger and Tesla), organic food can itself be perceived as a powerful and unique brand (see Bauer, Heinrich, & Schäfer, 2013; Ellison et al., 2016), and thus, it can confer underlying qualities. Second, during the impression formation process, the features of the “organic brand” are presumed to merge with the image of its user

(cf. Sirgy, 1982, 2018), which, in turn, functions as an input for observers' perceptual inference-making (cf. Fennis & Pruyn, 2007).

The interpretation process begins at signal transmission, which in the context of current work, includes cues suggesting the habitual use of organic foods (cf. Luomala et al., 2017). The consistent consumption of organic foods serves as the starting point because it indicates the reliability of the signal. Receivers of this signal decode it in the service of image formation – behaviors as mundane as food choices can act as impression-management vehicles (e.g., Bublitz, Peracchio, & Block, 2010; Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). Buyers of organic food, for example, may be viewed more positively than buyers of conventional food in many ways (Mazar & Zhong, 2010).

In the consumer image-formation process, both factual and symbolic cues associated with a person (Brooks & Wilson, 2015) and the product he or she uses (Allen et al., 2008) are elaborated upon more or less automatically and/or strategically (Sanders, 2010). The study by Noppers et al. (2014) concerning the adoption of sustainable innovations (e.g., electric cars) provides an illustrative example of this. These researchers discovered that while participants tended to rate instrumental attributes (e.g., “comfortable” and “affordable”) as very important, symbolic attributes (e.g., “shows who I am” and “enhances my social status”) were actually the strongest predictors of adoption, even though their significance was denied when the participants were asked directly. This also highlights a point discussed above: in many Western countries, particularly in Scandinavia, openly status-motivated acts are strongly associated with moral reservations (see Sortheix & Lönnqvist, 2014).

In the final phases of the process, signal receivers consciously (via the intentional use of attribute information) or non-consciously (via the automatic use of category labels) generate an interpretation concerning the meaning of the signal, or they may use both modes of interpretation (Fennis & Pruyn, 2007; Sanders, 2010). On the basis of this construal, an impression of the signal sender is formed, as is a predilection to treat him or her in a certain way during social interactions (cf. Luomala et al., 2017). If this image communicates underlying qualities, such as altruism and wealth, leading to execution of benevolent behaviors toward the message sender (a proxy for fitness benefits), then the behavioral strategy of favoring organic food does indeed qualify as a costly signal (Lee et al., 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

Naturally, the impression formation process can be moderated by many factors (Fiske et al., 1999). For this work, the relevant factors are the observer's sex (Saher et al., 2004), socio-cultural background (Chao & Schor, 1998), and value base

(Sexton & Sexton, 2014) – the former is considered to be influential in transmitting the signal as well. These potential moderators of impression are tackled more specifically in Chapters 2.3.6 and 2.3.7. Figure 1 illustrates the process of impression formation in more detail.

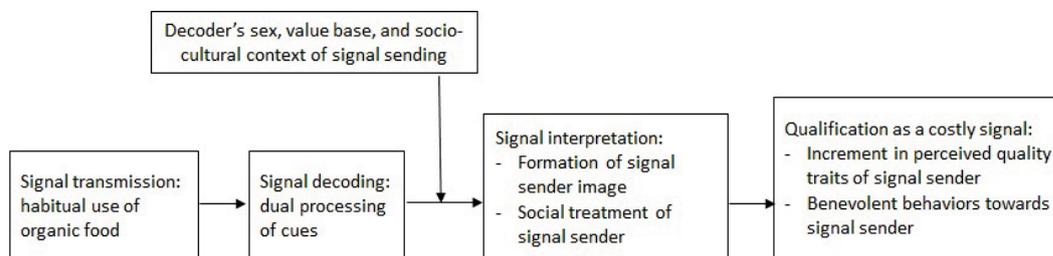


Figure 1. Impression formation model viewing organic foods as a costly signal

Next, the expected manifestations of prosocial status signaling and their moderators – along with the methods needed to expose “the going green to be seen” effect – are discussed in detail. Before that, the essence of the prosocial consumption realm is briefly illustrated.

2.3 Non-conscious materialization of prosocial status signaling in the consumption context of organic food

2.3.1 The essence of the prosocial consumption realm

Prosocial consumption refers to an individual’s behaviors (e.g., consuming less or donating to charity) that include an element of self-sacrifice for other people or the community (Small & Cryder, 2016). Gift giving – an extensively studied topic in the domain of other-centered acts (see Saad & Gill, 2003) – in contrast, is not necessarily prosocial behavior because it involves a fundamental expectation of reciprocity. Consumption is typically believed to be simply the pursuit of one’s own self-interest. That is, certain goods are purchased for one’s own benefit (comfortable and good-looking clothes, cars with high performance, and delicious foods). Sometimes, however, consumers make choices that are meant to create benefits not only for themselves but for others as well. Favoring sustainable products and donating to an environmental cause are prototypical examples of prosocial consumption: choosing a green product (vs. a non-green one) or supporting a sustainable issue financially reduces the burden on the planet (e.g., soil degradation and climate change) and thus ultimately benefits all.

In the food choice context, in addition to organic foods (environmental benefits and animal welfare), favoring fair trade (social responsibility beyond environmental aspects – see Coppola et al., 2017) and local production (supporting the nearby society and economy – see Grebitus, Lusk, & Nayga, 2013) can be considered forms of prosocial consumption. Consumers' motives in behaving prosocially, in turn, can be altruistic – it is noteworthy that there is an ongoing debate concerning whether altruism toward non-kin others can ever be entirely pure (see Barasch et al., 2014; Clavien & Klein, 2010) – or more-or-less self-centered (e.g., based on financial incentives, reputational benefits, demonstrating goodness to self, and causing neural pleasure sensations in the brain; see Small & Cryder, 2016).

Prosocial consumption has stimulated a large amount of empirical research in recent decades (see Ross & Kapitan, 2018). The majority of the insights produced are beyond the scope of this work. However, one central and often recurring finding is that regarding prosocial consumption decisions, consumers – even “true believers” – tend to say one thing and do another (see Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). To be more precise, consumers typically self-report that they are willing to pay extra for prosocial products, even if these would be inferior in terms of quality as compared to their non-prosocial counterparts. However, this commonly does not correspond to actual purchasing behavior (Olson, 2013). By applying the theory of planned behavior (see Hassan, Shiu, & Shaw, 2016), researchers have attempted to explain this “intention gap” in the realm of organic food as well (e.g., Aertsens et al., 2009).

Another intriguing and well-recognized finding is that the use of a prosocial product can create broader – contradictory and counterintuitive – marketplace behaviors (i.e., certain spillover and halo effects). To illustrate, consumers are inclined to use larger amounts of products with prosocial attributes, negating the potentially positive environmental effects of a sustainable option (Lin & Chang, 2012). Catlin and Wang (2013) provide an illustrative case example. They discovered that when there was a chance to recycle in a public toilet, consumers used more disposable hand towels than when there was no such option.

Hence, “prosocial consumerism” is a complex domain involving the pursuit of various goals (Ramirez, Jiménez, & Gau, 2015), multi-level information processing regarding product attributes (Irwin & Naylor, 2009), intention-behavior inconsistencies (Hassan et al., 2016), and weighing the benefits and costs of other-centered acts (see Ross & Kapitan, 2018). Here, as already stated, prosociality is understood primarily through greenness, and the focus is on how prosociality interacts with status symbolism.

2.3.2 Effects of content priming on consumer behavior

It has been argued above that the desire to attain status is a fundamental human motive (cf. Anderson et al., 2015). Intriguingly, for the purposes of the thesis, this tendency can be activated in many ways. One such method often applied in the context of consumption choices is priming (see Bargh, 2006). As Janiszewski and Wyer (2014) formulate in their review article, “priming is an experimental framework in which the processing of an initially encountered stimulus is shown to influence a response to a subsequently encountered stimulus.”

“Priming occurs because the processing of the prime stimulus makes content, and the cognitive operations used to comprehend and manipulate this content, more accessible. In turn, accessible content and operations can influence subsequent judgments, decisions and overt behavior. Priming can occur without awareness of the factors that increase the accessibility of the content and operations. Priming can also influence all stages of information processing, including attention, comprehension, memory retrieval, inference, and response generation” (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 97).

Priming effects can be yielded in a number of direct and indirect ways, but in the context of consumer psychology, two main streams are commonly highlighted: content priming and cognitive process priming. In short, the first focuses on how priming exposure (i.e., primed content) affects subsequent perceptions, judgments, choices, and other responses, whereas in the latter, the focus is on the effects of cognitive processing on a subsequently performed task (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 97, 106). This work deals with the realm of content priming. The current priming research suggest that four types of content can be primed (directly and indirectly): semantic, affective, goal (motivational), and behavioral (motor). These four types are explored in more detail with illustrative case examples below.

In semantic priming, the primer and the target are of the same semantic category (e.g., green and organic) and share certain features. They can be, for instance, people, events, objects, attributes, or the relationships between them. Jiang, Cho, and Adaval (2009) provide an example of direct semantic priming: the subliminal priming of luck using a lucky number or word increased participants' feelings of being lucky and increased their estimated odds of winning a lottery. Berger and Fitzsimmons (2008), in turn, provide a case-in-point of indirect semantic priming effects. They asked participants to list different types of sweets and beverages just before Halloween. The dominant color of Halloween (orange) primed brands with which this color was associated and increased the likelihood that these brands would be mentioned.

Goal priming (i.e., eliciting a certain goal and subsequent information processing and behavior to help accomplish that goal – Custers & Aarts, 2005) is often closely related to semantic priming: goals are represented in the memory as semantic knowledge (Van Osselaer & Janizevski, 2012). However, unlike semantic concepts, goals possess motivational properties, leading goal priming to operate differently than other types of semantic priming (see Sela & Shiv, 2009). An illustrative example of direct goal priming is provided by Bargh et al. (2001): priming achievement caused participants to work harder at a mundane task. Tong, Zheng, and Zhao (2013) discovered that after priming the concept of money, people became more frugal in their shopping choices. This is a good example of an indirect goal priming effect.

Direct affective priming occurs when primers (either chemical or stimulus-based) make affective states (e.g., moods, feeling states, and emotions) more accessible (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 101). Using odor primers, De Wijk and Zijlstra (2012) illustrated these effects well: priming with a citrus aroma improved participants' moods, increased their heart rates, and made them choose less cheese, while a vanilla aroma did not influence food choice but affected introverted emotions. Indirect affective priming occurs when semantic content, goals, or motor behavior induce an affective state due to an association between the primed content and the affective state (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 102). Goal pursuit and indirect affective priming often go hand in hand. For example, when athletes were primed with the goals of academic achievement and exercise, they experienced goal conflict and reduced their physical exercise (Bailis et al., 2011). Another example of this interplay is provided by Winkielman, Berridge, and Wilbarger (2005). They used smiling as compared to sad faces in their priming efforts and found that thirsty people poured and drank more of a beverage when the faces were happy as opposed to sad.

Direct behavioral priming occurs when the observation of a behavior increases the accessibility of the cognitive representation of the behavior and, consequently, the likelihood that the behavior will be performed (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 103). The most common type of direct behavioral priming is mimicry. Tanner et al. (2008) provide an example of such. Participants were told to watch a videotape of a confederate describing certain advertisements, with the objective of remembering the descriptions. Both the confederate and the participants had access to goldfish crackers and animal crackers. Observing a confederate who ate exclusively goldfish crackers increased the likelihood the participant would eat goldfish crackers, and the same was true for animal crackers.

Indirect behavioral priming occurs when the activation of semantic, goal, or affective content makes the behaviors associated with that content more accessible and, hence, more likely to be executed (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014, p. 103). For example, Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) discovered that participants primed with rudeness (or politeness) were more (or less) willing to interrupt an experimenter on a subsequent occasion. As in the case of indirect affective priming effects, corresponding behavioral effects are closely related to goal pursuit. To illustrate, words representing thirst-related behaviors (e.g., water, soda, and bottle) became more accessible when people were thirsty (i.e., had a highly active goal to quench their thirst) (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & De Vries, 2001).

In addition to physical performance, behavioral priming can also relate to cognitive acts; procedural knowledge (i.e., knowledge about how to do things) can be primed. Research on behavioral mindsets provide illustrative examples of procedural priming (see Shen & Wyer, 2010; Wyer, Shen, & Xu, 2013). To conclude, as the above discussion has shown, content priming involves distinct and often overlapping ways of creating priming effects. Subsequent responses, in turn, can be manifested in a variety of ways. In the current thesis, the focus is the indirect effects of status motivational goal priming, which are expected to occur in the form of behavioral and affective responses.

2.3.3 Effects of activating status motives on prosocial consumption choices

Current consumer research is familiar with a number of examples in which subjects' consumption behavior has been influenced by status motivational goal priming (i.e., by exposing them to reputational concerns). For example, in the study of Chartrand et al. (2008), priming prestige goals caused participants to prefer more high-priced options across product categories (socks, apartments, and sound systems). In a similar vein, in Ordabayeva and Chandon (2010), priming social competition goals increased participants' likelihood of choosing a status-enhancing trendy restaurant, especially when their sense of equality with others was high.

Corresponding choice effects after status priming have also been detected among female consumers in relation to luxury apparel (see Hudders et al., 2014; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). In the mundane food realm, it has been shown that after study participants were primed with different shades of power, they began to signal their status through the selection of a certain food product size; priming with a sense of powerlessness caused participants to favor – in the name of compensation – larger

portion sizes (Dubois et al., 2012). Priming the need for distinction, in turn, has been shown to increase the desirability of tasty food (Berger & Shiv, 2011).

Although status considerations have increasingly been linked to prosocial acts (e.g., charity donation behavior, volunteering, and various pro-environmental acts), research on the effects of status motive priming on non-egocentric choices is still limited. Griskevicius et al. (2010), which showed that status motives and materialistic choices do not always go hand in hand, is undoubtedly the clearest example of their compatibility: elucidating a desire for status through a fictional story led consumers to reject luxury and choose self-sacrificing green options across categories instead.

Another study that illustrates the link between status activation and prosocial acts – although not in relation to intended product choices – is that of Van der Wal et al. (2016). This paper revealed that sustainability-driven luxurious shops were capable of non-consciously triggering status needs, leading to the display of prosocial consumption behaviors. Rucker, Dubois, and Galinsky (2011) offers a third case-in-point. In this paper, activating a status motive caused people to spend more money on others than on themselves.

To conclude, in line with the previous discussion, it is expected that after activating status motives, prosocial status signaling will materialize primarily at the level of behavioral responses (i.e., product choices and purchase intentions). However, this is not necessarily the whole story. Goal-directed priming can create effects that go beyond the behavioral domain described above.

2.3.4 Effects of activating status motives on the senso-emotional experience of prosocial food

Regarding the effects of activating status motives on sensory-level food experiences, no direct evidence exist. However, conceptual explanations of why status concerns cannot create more physiology-driven experiences are lacking. As illustrated in the previous chapters, non-conscious goal priming can create a variety of reactions and responses in food and eating contexts. To illustrate this point further, non-conscious exposure to a well-known brand (cf. globally known organic foods) has been shown to make people more creative. In Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008), Apple-primed participants performed better on their appointed tasks than IBM-primed participants. The study of Irmak, Block, and Fitzsimons (2005) – conducted it the beverage realm – provides another illustrative example. It revealed that after consuming a can of placebo energy

drink, blood pressure increased significantly among participants with high performance motivation, but not among those with low performance motivation.

Why, then, would status motives create this more physiology-driven experience in relation to organic food? Allen et al. (2008) – drawing from Sirgy’s (1982) self-congruity theory – is useful in shedding light on this question. The researchers argued and also empirically verified that congruity between consumers’ personal values and food product symbolism will boost sensory perception, whereas an incongruity will decrease such perceptions – personal values are very close to basic human motivations (see Grunert, Hieke, & Wills, 2014).

Paasovaara et al. (2012) provides an illustrative case example. They found that after priming with a hedonistic value, the sensory perception of a yogurt brand carrying congruent symbolism was significantly elevated among participants appreciating hedonism. This effect did not manifest when they tasted a yogurt brand with incongruent symbolism (i.e., conservatism). Similarly, it is expected here – because green products are often associated with status-matching symbolism, such as socially highly valued perceptions of altruism and wealth – that after activating status motives, prosocial status signaling, or the “going green to be seen” effect, will materialize, in addition to consumption choices (i.e., the behavioral domain), in the senso-emotional experience of food (i.e., the affective domain).

The term “senso-emotional experience” refers to a consumer’s broad food experience, including both general hedonic liking and more specific taste emotions. It is a conceptualization created by the author of this thesis, who was inspired by the ideas of Thomson (2007) relating to the senso-emotional associations and optimization of food products. Although sensory food science has traditionally relied on hedonic evaluation when producing understanding about consumers’ food experiences (Lawless & Heymann, 2010), broader views have recently increased in popularity (Gutjar et al., 2015; Schouteten et al., 2017; Spinelli et al., 2015). A vast emphasis has been placed on emotional conceptualizations (Köster & Mojet, 2015; Thomson & Crocker, 2015). For instance, it has been shown that tasting a food can create specific “taste emotions” in consumers’ minds.

The interplay between the sensory properties of food and emotions is not a new concept. It is known, based on studies conducted at the “meta-level,” that a sweet taste, for instance, can create positive emotions, whereas a bitter taste can evoke negative ones (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999); salty and sour may elicit various emotional associations, such as surprise, sadness, and fear (Rousmans et al., 2000). Conversely, ones’ taste perceptions can be moderated by his or her

emotional state (e.g., Noel & Dando, 2015). Thomson et al. (2010) provides an illustrative example of more complex senso-emotional conceptualizations. To be more precise, during the tasting, one dark chocolate brand characterized by its sweet and creamy flavor yielded emotional associations such as fun, easy-goingness, and comfort, while another dark chocolate brand with a bitter and coffee-like flavor was related to confidence, adventurousness, and masculinity.

Several other studies have recently investigated similar dynamics between sensory properties and emotional responses, comparing different product categories (Cardello et al., 2012; King & Meiselman, 2010) or products within a specific product category, such as blackcurrant squashes (Ng, Chaya, & Hort, 2013) and softeners (Porcherot et al., 2013). In addition, many techniques and questionnaires have been developed to capture these nuanced relationships, such as the esSense profile (King & Meiselman, 2010), the EmoSemio (Spinelli et al., 2014), and the EmoSensory Wheel (Schouteten et al., 2015). In other words, it is now widely recognized that consumers' food experience is not limited in hedonic liking (i.e., taste pleasantness) but also involves emotional responses (i.e., taste emotions).

However, in determining whether prosocial (or more materialism-driven) status signaling occurs through behavioral (i.e., consumption choices) or affective (i.e., senso-emotional food experience) responses, the situation matters (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Specifically, in a situation visible to others, reputational concerns are much more salient.

2.3.5 The role of social visibility in prosocial status signaling

The effects of priming with status on consumer choices and also on more physiology-driven food experiences can be influenced by several factors. One well-established moderator that cannot be ignored is the social visibility of the one's consumption choice (see Brick, Sherman, & Kim, 2017; Josiassen & Assaf, 2013). For example, in the choice context of chocolate, Kimura et al. (2012) discovered that those study participants who thought that their choices were monitored by others valued the fair-trade aspect more highly than the participants who were led to believe that their choices remained private.

According to the key tenets of costly signaling theory – and virtually all other signaling conceptualizations as well (see Connelly et al., 2011) – the impact of status motives on behaviors depends on the social visibility of the situation (choice and tasting). Public purchases, for example, can conspicuously signal the features of the buyer to an immediate audience (i.e., to create reputational benefits – see

Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). In contrast, if the purchases are made without an audience, the signaling function loses power (i.e., reputational benefits do not arise). Because the purchase of green products enables a person to signal that he or she is both willing and able to buy a product that benefits others at the cost of his or her own personal resources, eliciting a motive for status may lead people to engage in “conspicuous conservation,” that is, a public pro-environmental act (cf. Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013).

Indeed, Griskevicius et al. (2010) showed that activating status motives caused people to prefer green products over more luxurious non-green products only when they imagined shopping in public. Regarding the social visibility of prosocial acts in general (e.g., conservation, cooperation, and charity), people have developed some sensitivity (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006). It has been shown in public goods experiments that people are prone to give money to preserve the environment only when the donation is public and can thus influence one’s reputation (Milinski et al., 2006). Similarly, the belief that one is being watched caused people to litter less (Bateson et al., 2013). To conclude, in line with the above discussion, it is expected that a public situation (as compared to private) will boost prosocial status signaling effects (both behavioral and affective) that occur via organic food consumption.

2.3.6 The role of sex and socio-cultural context in interpreting prosocial status signaling

It has been shown above that consumers make inferences about one another’s social status based on their consumption choices and may even treat others in certain way depending on the nature of their choices (e.g., luxury vs. non-luxury products). It is therefore likely that the effects of favoring a certain product or brand (cf. *organic food*) will manifest in the form of perceptual inferences and behavioral implications. In the previous sections of the work, evidence has also been marshaled to suggest that mundane organic food consumption may confer underlying, socially valued traits to an individual and even yield more favorable treatment. However, interpretation effects can be moderated by several factors (see also Chapter 2.2.3 – impression formation model).

The observer’s sex is the first potential moderator (Saher et al., 2004). It is known that women are more avid organic food purchasers than men (e.g., Bravo et al., 2013). In general, female sex positively moderates the relationship between attitude and environmentally friendly behaviors (Wai & Bojei, 2015). Among female observers, pro-organic status-signaler can be viewed as more refined (e.g., elegant and attractive), while male observers’ perceptions tend toward elitist

elements, such as “successful” or “prestigious” (cf. Roux, Tafani, & Vigneron, 2017). Hence, it is possible that the signals sent by organic food are interpreted differently by men and women.

The intra-sex signaling context should not be overlooked. In fact, differences in interpreting prosocial status signals may be more likely to emerge if the sender and the interpreter represent the same sex (see Buss, 1988). Namely, as stated during the discussion of social identities (see Chapter 2.2.1), consumption choices are effective in carrying hints about whether the actor and the observer belong to the same “tribe.” That is, are they members of the same “in-group” (see Chan et al., 2012). This is crucial because it is well-known (cf. key tenets of the SIT and self-categorization, Turner et al., 1987) that humans have a tendency to act more altruistically toward non-kin individuals if they feel that they belong to the same “in-group” (e.g., Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Evolutionary-driven research knows this behavior as parochial altruism (see Berharnd et al., 2006) – it is typical of intra-sex interactions, especially between males.

According to Kurzban and Leary (2001), evolutionary selection pressure has created a complex coalitional psychology for men: a set of domain-specific cognitive systems that are designed to cope with intergroup competition. This has equipped men with the capacity to make quick “us” vs. “them” categorizations, resulting in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination (see Van Vugt, De Cremer, & Janssen, 2007). Hence, it is suggested here that sex dynamics – especially those between same-sex individuals – can moderate how prosocial status signaling via organic food consumption is interpreted.

Another potential moderator is the socio-cultural context in which prosocial (or any other) status signaling takes place (Inglehart, 1997). According to the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory, which this dissertation largely draws from, social status is associated with prosociality, but what is perceived as prosocial naturally differs between areas, cultures, and subcultures. In modern Western societies, sustainable consumption choices are likely viewed as prosocial, but in less-developed societies, prosociality can be understood in different ways. Due to many societal problems, environmental issues are not considered important (cf. Van Kempen et al., 2009). To illustrate, building a heavily polluting factory in a rural Chinese village is likely to be perceived as an altruistic act by locals because it brings needed jobs to the area (cf. Griskevicius et al., 2010).

One of the key assumptions of the status consumption literature is that the urban-rural divide influences the demand for status items (Chao & Schor, 1998). Consequently, even within highly developed and rather homogenous Western

countries (cf. Finland), there may be variations in terms of how status-seeking behaviors such as favoring organic foods are seen, for example, due to the differences in worldviews and commonsense knowledge related to natural foods between city dwellers and residents of the countryside (cf. Kooijmans & Flores-Palacios, 2014). Furthermore, although organic farming is currently accepted practice in Finnish rural areas this has not always been the case (see Siltaoja et al., 2015). Hence, it is suggested here that the urban-rural divide can have a moderating role in how prosocial status signaling via organic food consumption is viewed. In addition to sex dynamics and socio-cultural context, psychological factors such as the personal values (Schwartz, 1992, 2010) can also be influential in this regard.

2.3.7 The role of personal values in interpreting prosocial status signaling

In the previous chapter, two factors were identified that can moderate the interpretation of prosocial status signaling. The third potential moderator is the observer's personal value base. This is especially true for two reasons. First, values guide our evaluations of our fellow people (Schwartz, 1992, 2006), and some values (e.g., universalism and security) are inherently linked to prosociality (Schwartz, 2010). Second, it is well-documented that many of consumers' food- and eating-related responses, such as product perceptions (e.g., Botonaki & Mattas, 2010; Dreezens et al., 2005), brand evaluations (e.g., Laureati et al., 2013), choices (e.g., Fotopoulos, Krystallis, & Anastasios, 2011; Thøgersen, 2011), and even sensory-level experiences (e.g., Paasovaara et al., 2012; Pohjanheimo et al., 2010) are shaped by their values.

Regarding value effects during impression formation, Sexton and Sexton (2014), for example, discovered that having a hybrid Prius confers a greater benefit in communities that endorse environmental values. More broadly, it has been speculated that the image of a person participating in prosocial behaviors may be dependent on the extent to which the people monitoring the act cherish altruism in general (see Willer, 2009). In a similar vein, Brooks and Wilson (2015) proposed that observers' values affect the perceived status of a person believed to purposively reduce consumption.

In the organic food realm, potential value effects can also be viewed through (in)congruity accounts (see Chapters 2.2.1 and 2.3.4). As stated above, this line of thinking holds, in the nutshell, that people tend to like entities (cf. organic food and their favorers) that possess congruent symbolism with their self-concepts and dislike those with incongruent symbolism (Sirgy, 1982, 2018). In fact,

(in)congruity perceptions can materialize in many food- and eating-related responses, such as whether a food product is selected or its taste is liked (see Allen et al., 2008).

The typical symbolism encompassing organic food often relates to healthiness, superior taste (including freshness), food safety, high price (cf. social status), and various ethical aspects, such as environmental friendliness and animal welfare (e.g., Hemmerling et al., 2015; Kareklas et al., 2014). These beliefs are, in many ways, both congruent and incongruent with Schwartz's (1992) classic value circumplex's main clusters (self-transcendence, self-enhancement, openness to change, and conservation – see Caracciolo et al., 2016; Costa et al., 2014). Consequently, (in)congruity may (un)favorably affect the image of an organic food favorer and thus moderate the materialization of prosocial status signaling.

To briefly illustrate the potential (in)congruities (i.e., relationships between observers' values and organic food symbolism), the features congruent with the self-transcendence value cluster are ethical aspects, while the price aspects are incongruent. For the self-enhancement value cluster, conversely, status connotations related to high price are a congruent feature, while ethical aspects are incongruent. The congruent symbolism for the conservatism value cluster represents above all healthiness, while hedonistic aspects (i.e., taste and freshness) are probably more incongruent. For the openness-to-change value cluster, conversely, hedonism is definitely a congruent feature, while healthiness is more or less incongruent (see Aertsens et al., 2009; Caracciolo et al., 2016).

To conclude, in line with the previous discussion, it is suggested here that observers' own values can moderate how prosocial status signaling manifesting through favoring organic food is interpreted (cf. Luomala et al., 2017). The conceptual framework of the dissertation is outlined below in more detail.

2.4 Development of the conceptual framework

Previous chapters have dealt with status-motivated consumption behavior, its potential root causes, and the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling, taking the key features of organic food into account. Based on this discussion, a theoretical model for the phenomenon is formed (Figure 2, "A" refers to an article in which these relationships are being studied). Fundamentally, the model depicts the manifestations of prosocial status signaling occurring through organic food consumption. It is grounded in the idea that these manifestations can arise consciously, non-consciously, or in combination. Like virtually all

communications between individuals, organic food-related prosocial status signaling involves two key parties: the sender of the signal and its interpreter.

As for sending the signal, prosocial status signaling may involve elements not only of behavioral responses (product choice and intention to purchase) but also more physiology-driven – affective – experiences (hedonistic liking and more specific taste emotions). It is suggested here that one prerequisite for this to occur is making the reputational concerns salient, such as activating consumers' status motives implicitly. Because whether the status is signaled privately or publicly matters, the social visibility of the situation is expected to moderate the emergence of the above-mentioned effects.

Regarding the occurrence of prosocial status signaling in relation to interpreting the signal, it is expected to include elements of both socially valued characteristics and traits (i.e., perceptual inferences) and more behavior-driven implications (i.e., treatment). It is also suggested that sex-dynamics, the socio-cultural context of the signaling, and observers' values moderate how these interpretation effects materialize through favoring organic food. In regard to the three articles, prosocial status signaling can be investigated from either signal sender's or interpreter's perspective via explicit or implicit methods. In the first paper, the focus is on sending the signal, whereas in the latter two, the focus is on interpreting the signal.

The first article (A1) implicitly examines, on the one hand, the extent to which activating a non-conscious status motive influences the preference for organic food and the associated senso-emotional experience and, on the other hand, whether the social visibility of the situation moderates these effects. It is hypothesized that after eliciting the desire for status, consumers prefer organic food more and experience it as senso-emotionally more pleasant and that a situation visible to others will further boost both of these effects.

The second article (A2) implicitly investigates prosocial status signaling between males through favoring organic food in distinct socio-cultural contexts. It is hypothesized that men interpret a pro-organic male status-signaler either positively or negatively – materializing at the level of perceptual inferences and behavior implications – depending on whether the signaling occurs in an urban or rural setting.

The third article (A3) explicitly explores the extent to which organic food consumption confers socially highly valued characteristics among consumers with different worldviews. It is hypothesized that organic food consumption can be perceived as a signal of prosocial tendencies and that the impression of organic consumers is dependent on the observer's personal value priorities.

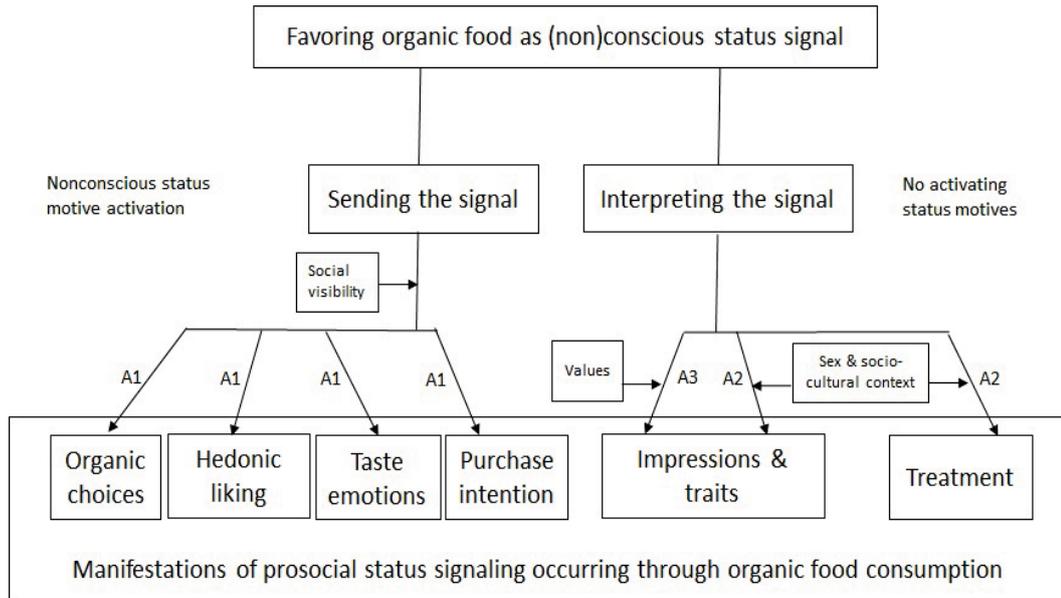


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the dissertation: selected perspectives, expected manifestations, and proposed moderators

The presented hypotheses are investigated in the empirical section of the work. Prior to that, the methodological choices will be explained.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the principles and methods applied during data collection and analysis are elucidated. First, the paradigmatic assumptions with regard to the research field are discussed. Then, the selected research approaches are justified. Finally, the data collection procedures and analysis methods applied are discussed in more detail.

3.1 Assumptions of the philosophy of science

In all fields of social science, there are several ways to perform research – this also holds for the consumer research domain (Simonson et al., 2001). Although methodological choices differ substantially between research fields and disciplines, certain principles are universal. That is, every researcher should follow certain principles when producing a credible understanding of the studied phenomenon. An applied philosophic framework (i.e., paradigm) must always be put forward so that fellow scholars and other readers can understand and evaluate the research process and its credibility (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

In consumer research, the perspectives are roughly divisible into positivistic and interpretative streams, with several sub-views (see Solomon et al., 2014). The former emphasizes the objectivity of science and sees the consumer as a rational decision maker. The latter, in turn, underlines the importance of symbolic, relative, and subjective meanings, as well as the possibility of interpreting consumption-related behaviors in many ways (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). These streams differ fundamentally from one other with respect to ontological and epistemological assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), but both are widely applied and recognized in the domain of consumer research (see Simonson et al., 2001; Tadajewski, 2004). In fact, it is not unusual that they be applied in a single study dealing with marketing (see Harrison & Reilly, 2011).

The current thesis draws from the positivistic research tradition. However, it recognizes that the interpretive stream may be useful when the specifics and subtle nuances of the findings are tackled in a more detailed manner (cf. Tadajewski, 2008). From the ontological and epistemological points of view, however, these traditions are opposites. The first addresses questions about the nature of reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), while the latter addresses the relationship between the researcher and reality (Carson et al., 2001); epistemological choices (e.g., the distance between the researcher and the respondent and the methods used) are typically consequences of ontological assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Positivist ontology starts from the premise that there is only one real world, in which objective perceptions are constructed into reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Accordingly, positivist epistemology suggests that due to this objectivity, an understanding of this reality should be obtained through logical and rational (i.e., relatively rigid) methods and independent of the research informants (Carson et al., 2001). According to positivists, parts of this reality can be detached and placed under controlled conditions to make observations. Under such circumstances, as in laboratories or carefully planned field experiments, a researcher can deal with complex relationships, control irrelevant factors, and perform accurate measurements and observations of this world (Carson et al., 2001; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988).

In line with these key positivistic premises, the current thesis examines a small part of reality under carefully constructed and controlled conditions. To be more precise, the relationships between quantitative variables in regard to organic food consumption and status signaling are investigated and measured in thoroughly controlled experimental setups and independently of the respondents.

3.2 Research strategy

This work relies on experimental research throughout the articles that is in line with the key principles of the positivistic research tradition. In the nutshell, experimental research aims to investigate and control the study subject as closely as possible (Creswell, 2013). In other words, the design of the research must be formulated in such a way that the dependent variable (e.g., perceptual inference) can only be influenced by the desired independent variable (e.g., an organic food cue). Potential moderators and mediators must also be included in this equation. As a result, when these factors are controlled, credible conclusions can be drawn regarding its effect on the study subject (i.e., causal relationships).

Experimental research was the logical choice for this dissertation for a several reasons. Recall that across the papers, the aim was to investigate organic food vs. non-organic food-related actions, whether the subject was product choices, senso-emotional experiences, consumer impressions, or behavior implications. Situation, as such, is an ideal starting point for experimental research. Moreover, with experiments, it is possible to collect a great deal of data simultaneously. In other words, mapping the proposed moderators (e.g., value base) and mediators (e.g., specific organic food attitudes) is possible with relatively little effort.

Regarding the more specific research themes and methods, the application of the priming methodology (a delicate tool with many moving parts) and the

implementation of a sensory setup (tasting a food sample) without an experimental setting is virtually impossible. In addition, particularly in regard to priming, the researcher had to develop interactive relationships with the study participants in order to ensure everything went as planned while still maintaining researcher independence. Furthermore, most of key papers underlying the theoretical thinking used in the thesis (e.g., Dubois et al., 2012; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) were conducted through experimental research. Although there are a number other approaches that are capable of creating important knowledge about the phenomenon investigated (see Creswell, 2013), when testing hypotheses and searching for causal relationships, experiments are typically the best choice.

Four experimental setups were carried out with small, distinct variations. In the *first experiment* (A1), after status priming vs. control priming, study participants had to choose (using photographs in the questionnaire) between real organic food products and their conventional counterparts in either a public or private situation. That is, a 2 x 2 between-subjects design was used. Figure 3 illustrates the design of the first experiment.

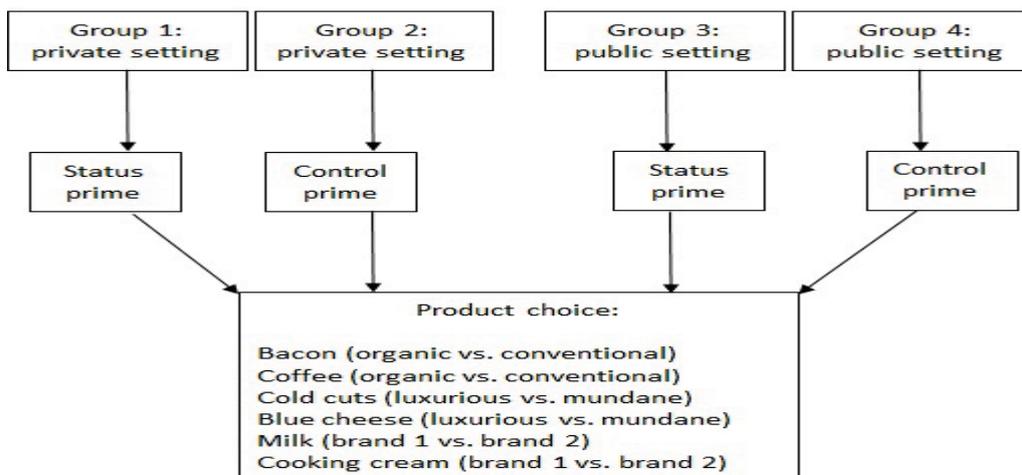


Figure 3. Design of Experiment 1

In the *second experiment* (A1), after status priming vs. control priming, study participants had to taste a food sample served as organically or conventionally produced in either a public or private situation and evaluate its pleasantness in terms of several senso-emotional properties (see Thomson, 2007). That is, a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects design was used. Figure 4 illustrates the design of the second experiment.

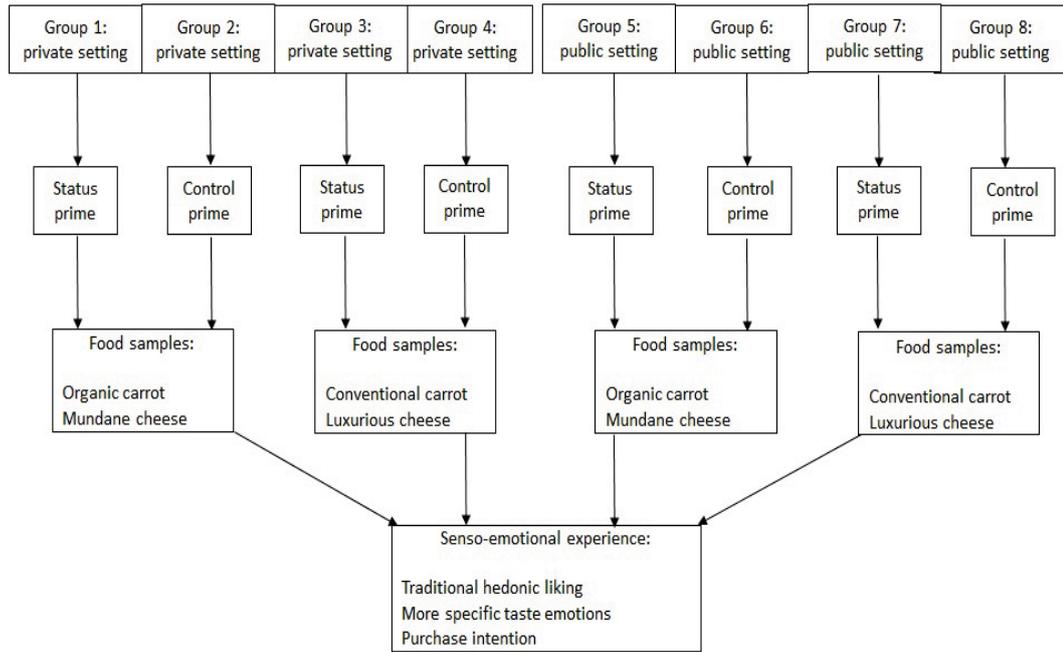


Figure 4. Design of Experiment 2

In the *third experiment* (A2), following subtle exposure to an organic cue vs. no cue, study participants had to evaluate a person who seemed to be pro-organic vs. non-organic (based on a photograph in the questionnaire) in terms of several desirable traits and donate a hypothetical amount of money to this person (identical experiments were conducted in both urban and rural areas). That is, a 2 x 2 between-subjects design was used. Figure 5 illustrates the design of the third experiment.

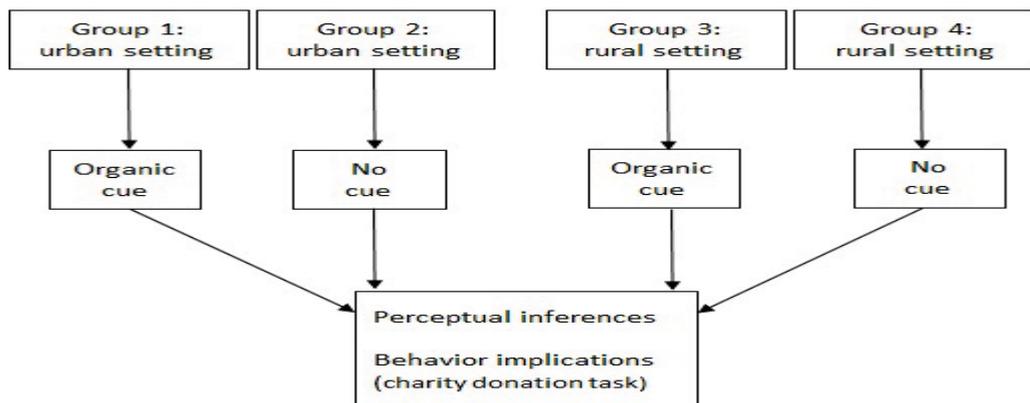


Figure 5. Design of Experiment 3

In the *fourth experiment* (A3), study participants had to evaluate (without any indirect cue or prime exposure), a person presented as a regular user of organic vs. conventional food in terms of several socially valued characteristics (the study was

carried out online). That is, a 2 x 2, between-subjects design was used. Figure 6 illustrates the design of the fourth experiment.

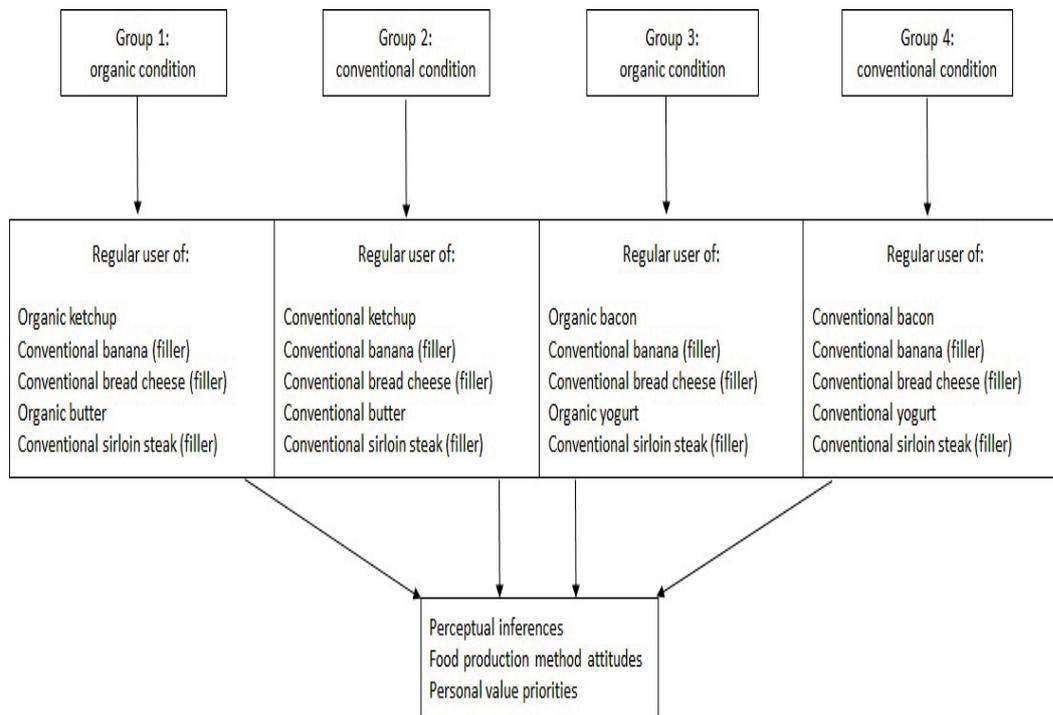


Figure 6. Design of Experiment 4

In the *first experiment* (A1), bacon and coffee were selected as target products because they represented well-known product types with different symbolic meanings – even when manufactured by the same brand – and they were available in both forms (organic vs. conventional) at the time of the study. As for the other included food product types, blue cheese and cold cuts were chosen because with these product types, it was possible to create a luxurious vs. mundane product pair. Incorporating this division was important because according to traditional status signaling perspectives, activating status motives should explicitly lead to a preference for more indulgent food products at the expense of conventional ones (see Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Milk and cooking cream, on the other hand, represented relatively neutral product types (i.e., they were the ideal choices for filler products).

In the *second experiment* (A1), senso-emotional experience was measured with two food samples: carrot (in the crated form) and cheese (as chunks). The first represented the organic vs. conventional comparison. Carrot was chosen because as a relatively simple agricultural product, it is free from complex food symbolism. Cheese, in turn, was selected as it provides the opportunity to create the luxurious vs. mundane division described above (cf. Vieitez et al., 2014). Again, the aim was

to rule out the possibility that status motives would lead to favoring more luxurious options or even all “unusual” options.

In the *third experiment* (A2), the researcher applied T-shirt logos as a manipulation instrument instead of actual organic food products because these logos were believed to communicate more strongly that a given person is indeed “pro-organic.” In other words, because not only simple perceptual inferences were measured but also behavior implications, a “more personal” priming instrument was needed. In addition, a shirt (with or without a logo) has often been successfully used as a manipulation tool in consumer impression studies (e.g., Lee et al., 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

In the *fourth experiment* (A3), consumer impressions materializing through organic vs. conventional food usage were investigated by showing pictures of actual food products to study participants. This inquiring logic, also known as the “user imagery” style, is a commonly applied method in the domain of consumer research; it has been used to reveal product and brand images (Parker, 2009) and their impacts on consumer impressions and attitudes (Liu et al., 2012). As in the case of Experiment One, the target products were manufactured by the same brand and available in both forms during the research. In addition, their packagings were very similar. Below, the data collection processes and procedures of the experiments are explored in more detail.

3.3 Data collection

A total of six independent data samples were collected in four experimental settings to provide an understanding of the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling via organic food consumption. Table 1 reveals the details of the collected data samples. It is noteworthy that Datasets 1 and 2, as well as 4 and 5, were collected with practically identical methods (i.e., in the analyses, they can be treated as one broad sample). All data were collected as a part of a multidisciplinary research project funded by the Academy of Finland: *Mainstreaming Green Economy – Legitimation of organic production and consumption (MainGreen)*. The partners in this consortium came from the Universities of Vaasa, Helsinki (Ruralia Institute), and Jyväskylä (JSBE), including consumer researchers, scholars working with rural developing issues, and critical management scientists.

Table 1. Key features of the collected samples

* = all study participants had graduated from or were enrolled in a university

	Data 1	Data 2	Data 3	Data 4	Data 5	Data 6
Sample size	80	88	257	84	69	168
Study participants	Student consumers	Student consumers	Student consumers	Mall shoppers	Food fair quests	Consumer panelists
Place of residence	Urban residents	Urban residents	Urban residents	Urban residents	Rural residents	Urban residents
Mean age	26.1	28.3	25.0	36.8	42.4	47.6
% men	50	50	45	100	100	49
% highly educated	100*	100*	100*	42.9	26.1	-
Household yearly incomes	0-19999 € (55%)	0-19999 € (57%)	0-19999 € (58%)	40000-69999 € (28%)	40000-69999 € (34%)	40000-69999 € (22%)

3.3.1 Procedure for Experiment 1: Article 1

Two separate datasets were collected by altering the social visibility of the choice situation, in the university library of a large city, on the pretext of an academic memory recall task. The time difference between the data collections was approximately two months. The first collection (data 1, private choice) consisted of 80 student consumers (mean age 26.1 years, 50% men), while the second (data 2, public choice) consisted of 88 student consumers (mean age 28.3 years, 50% men). In both settings, the students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: 1) status-priming under private condition and 2) control-priming under private condition or 1) status-priming under public condition and 2) control-priming under public condition. Because the variables were otherwise identical, in the subsequent analysis, the datasets were pooled.

Status motives (vs. control motives) were triggered by showing participants a word list at the beginning of the study (20 Finnish nouns) that contained either 12/20 words related to high status (e.g., luxury product, designer watch, and first class) or a list containing only neutral control words (e.g., backpack, table lamp, and fraction). The participants had three minutes to memorize the words: they were told that they would be asked about the words again at the end of the study (see Maio et al., 2009). Data collectors ensured that the words were memorized in the time required. After that but before they were allowed to make their product choices, the participants had to answer certain filler questions related to their use of technology. This section was added to conceal the true purpose of the study.

Then, the study participants had to make dichotomous choices between six counterbalanced product pairs. Two pairs included an organic option: bacon and coffee (see Chapter 3.2). The social visibility of the choice situation was manipulated by instructing some of the participants, before the product choice task (public setting, Dataset 2), that they should imagine that they are shopping for ingredients with a friend for an important dinner (cf. Griskevicius et al., 2010; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2010), while other participants were simply asked to choose between the alternatives (private setting, Dataset 1). After that, their activity levels (e.g., mood and tiredness), production method, and brand attitudes were investigated, along with their background characteristics.

Lastly, participants were asked to indicate, both orally and in writing, what they believed the actual purpose of the study to have been. These post-study interviews did not reveal any suspiciousness. The procedure took an average of 15 to 20 minutes. The capability of the status word list (relative to the control word list) to elicit a desire for status among consumers was verified with a separate manipulation check, specifically applying Eastman et al.'s (1999) status consumption statements. Similarly, the capability of the selected organic food products to confer prosociality was successfully pre-tested with a separate sample. More detailed descriptions of the procedures and conducted pre-tests can be found in Article 1.

3.3.2 Procedure for Experiment 2: Article 1

A total of 257 student consumers (mean age 25.0 years, 45% men) participated in the study in a university campus area of a large Finnish city; the study was presented as a memory recall task, which also involved tasting food samples (Dataset 3). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 1) status-priming under private condition, 2) control-priming under private condition, 3) status-priming under public condition, and 4) control-priming under public condition.

The design of the experiment was otherwise identical to that of Experiment 1, but this time – instead of making product choices – participants had to taste two actual food samples (carrot and cheese) and evaluate their hedonic pleasantness and indicate the more specific emotions the taste elicited (see Spinelli et al., 2014); the latter contained both positive-negative, as well as private-collective emotions (see Luomala, Sirieix, & Tahir, 2009; Onwezen, 2015). Participants were also requested to indicate the intensity of their purchase intentions toward the foods they tasted. A 1–7 scale was always used. The served foods were reported to be organically or conventionally produced carrots (in grated form) and luxurious vs. mundane

cheese (in chunks). In reality, the food samples were always prepared using the same food product material (conventionally produced carrot and mundane cheese). The experiments were carried out in quiet classrooms equipped with three-walled cubicles.

This time, the social visibility of the situation was manipulated by leading the study participants assigned to the public condition ($n=137$) to believe that they were supposed to share their food responses with the researchers at the end of the experiment (this instruction was given both orally and via text in the questionnaire). Under the private condition ($n=120$), no such instructions were voiced. This time, the post-study interviews did not reveal any suspiciousness. The procedure took an average of 20–25 minutes. More detailed descriptions of the procedure (e.g., the entire cover story and how the foods were served) can be found in Article 1.

3.3.3 Procedure for Experiment 3: Article 2

Two separate datasets were collected using identical intercept methods in an urban and in a rural area; the studies were presented as being about “impression formation concerning food consumers.” The first (Dataset 4) consisted of 84 male mall shoppers (mean age 36.8 years, 42.9% highly educated), while the second (Dataset 5) contained 69 male food fair attendees (mean age, 42.4 years, 26.1% highly educated). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Specifically, they had to evaluate (based on a picture in the questionnaire) 1) a male wearing an organic-labeled white T-shirt or 2) a male wearing a blank white T-shirt in terms of certain socially valued traits (e.g., trustworthiness and affluence) on a 7-point scale. In line with the well-established approach to revealing implicit effects (e.g., Brasel & Gips, 2011; Park & John, 2014), the subtle logo (a nationally well-known ladybug) served as a cue suggestive of a favorer of organic foods.

Participants were then asked to indicate how much money they would donate to this man (a freely chosen amount in Euros) if he was collecting donations for the disaster relief work of the local Red Cross. This question served to measure how (un)favorably the pro-organic male signaler was treated by other males (cf. Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). At the end of these studies, the extent to which the study participants perceived organic food to be cheaper or more expensive than conventionally produced food across product categories was determined on a 5-point scale. The procedure took an average of 3–6 minutes (background characteristics were recorded at the beginning of the studies). A separate pre-test was conducted in the settings of both studies to ensure that the subtle organic logo used was recognizable and its meaning was understood as intended. This was

indeed the case. More detailed descriptions of the procedure (e.g., how the pre-test was carried out and the used photographs) can be found in Article 2.

3.3.4 Procedure for Experiment 4: Article 3

A total of 168 consumers (mean age 47.6 years, 49% men) participated in the study online. The study was presented as “an academic consumer impression survey.” Participants were recruited from the panel of a Finnish market research company; they all came from the Helsinki metropolitan area. The online platform utilized was pre-tested by the author; it did not allow a participant, for instance, to move forward through the survey before answering all the questions on a given page (nor was it possible to go back to a previous page).

Consumer panelists received an e-mail requesting that they participate in the study, in which they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Specifically, they had to form an image of a consumer who was presented as a regular user of either 1) organic food or 2) conventional food in terms of several socially valued characteristics (e.g., altruism and sophistication) using a 9-point scale. Food product pictures (organically vs. conventionally produced ketchup, butter, yogurt, and bacon) were shown on a screen one by one, in line with the user imagery approach (see Liu et al., 2012; Parker, 2009). Participants were also asked to evaluate users of certain conventionally produced filler products.

After the consumer image questions, participants’ attitudes toward all the studied products (scale: 1–5) were investigated. Then, their value priorities were unraveled. Schwartz’s short ten-item measure (see Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005) was used to determine the value priorities. To be more precise, in the case of each main value cluster (power, achievement, universalism, benevolence, stimulation, self-direction, hedonism, security, conformity, and tradition), participants were asked to indicate how important that cluster was to him or her on a 7-point scale. The author of this work is well aware that other conceptualizations can also be used to capture consumers’ value priorities; Rokeach’s (1973) and Hofstede’s (1983) value theories provide widely applied examples of such tools. However, Schwartz’s theory of values was selected because it is not only often used in the organic food realm but also applied among people with distinct cultural backgrounds (see Thøgersen et al., 2016). Finally, participants’ brand attitudes and familiarities with the products, along with their background characteristics, were investigated. More detailed descriptions of the procedure (e.g., an example of the food product pictures shown) can be found in Article 3.

3.4 Data analysis

Statistical tests were used to analyze the data (all datasets were recorded in quantitative form). The analyses were performed with SPSS software Versions 22.0–24.0, with Preacher and Hayes's (2008) extension macro. In the case of *Dataset 1* (A1), the researcher first searched for evidence of the effect of motive priming (status vs. control) on choice preferences (organic vs. conventional or luxurious vs. mundane) with a 1-way ANOVA. Then, the effect sizes were calculated (Cohen's *d*). In the case of *Dataset 2* (A1), after it was merged with Dataset 1 – recall that the measured variables were exactly the same – a 2-way ANOVA with motive priming (status vs. control) and choice situation (private vs. public) as IVs and food choice as the DV was performed.

After the emergence of a significant interaction, the researcher searched for more specific differences via the simple effect procedure (see Griskevicius et al., 2010). To be more precise, for example, the researcher attempted to determine whether a public choice situation (rather than a private one), together with priming status, lead consumers to favor organic food options over their conventionally produced counterparts. Effect sizes were calculated for both the interaction term (eta-square) and the outcomes of the simple effect analyses (Cohen's *d*). Prior to performing a 2-way ANOVA, one index measure for choice was created by combining the two target variables (bacon and coffee), following the procedure of Wheeler and Berger (2007). This was possible because the product type did not interact with the production form.

The analysis of *Dataset 3* (A1) followed practically the same procedure as the previous one (i.e., the merged data), although this sample was collected at one time (i.e., there was no need for pooling datasets). Specifically, to determine whether status motive activation and the visibility of food responses had different effects on the senso-emotional experience of a food sample that the participants were told was conventionally or organically produced (DVs: taste, joy, hopefulness, disappointment, irritability, and purchase intention), a 3-way ANOVA with motive (status vs. control), informed production method (organic vs. conventional) and audience (private vs. public) as IVs was performed. This was followed by a more specific simple effect analyses to determine the 3-way ANOVA indicated a significant interaction. Effect sizes were again calculated for both the interaction term (eta-square) and the outcomes of the simple effect analyses (Cohen's *d*).

In the case of *Datasets 4* and *5* (A2), an alternative approach was chosen: these were first analyzed separately, although the measured variables were exactly the same. In these identical comparisons, perceptual differences were investigated

first with a 1-way ANOVA. Pro-organic signaling male (yes vs. no) was used as the IV, and socially valued traits were used as the DVs. For the analysis, index measures were formed from single traits (e.g., the final multi-item measure for altruism contained the single items unselfishness, helpfulness, and generosity). This was possible because the Cronbach's alphas showed a sufficiently high internal consistency (Bonett & Wright, 2014). Regarding the donation variable, differences were investigated with a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test. This variable was not normally distributed in either of the samples, excluding the possibility of applying parametric statistical tests.

Lastly, the two datasets were pooled, and a 2-way ANOVA with pro-organic signaling (yes vs. no) and socio-cultural context (urban vs. rural) as IVs and socially valued traits as DVs was performed. This was done because a statistically significant interaction would offer more credence to the findings of the separately analyzed datasets. Regarding the donation variable, this parametric analysis was not conducted because that variable, as stated above, was not normally distributed.

In the case of *Dataset 6* (A3), a 1-way ANOVA was performed first to determine whether regular users of organic vs. conventional food products (IVs) are perceived differently in relation to certain socially valued characteristics (DV). A similar approach was chosen to that used when the participants' attitudes (DV) towards the studied organic vs. conventional food products (IVs) was investigated. Effect size calculations (Cohen's *d*) followed these procedures. The interplay between the previous variables (IVs and DVs) and the participants' personal value priorities was analyzed as follows.

The relationships between values and organic food attitudes and between values and consumer impressions was analyzed first via Pearson's correlations and then through Preacher and Hayes's (2008) multiple regression procedure. The relationships between single values was first assessed via Pearson's correlations and then – when forming index measures – through Cronbach's alphas. Of Schwartz's (1992) ten main value clusters, four meta-indexes were created in line with the previous literature (see Caracciolo et al., 2016; Costa et al., 2014) for this analysis. The alphas indicated sufficiently high internal consistency. Because the current research was familiar with similar applications of Schwartz's theory in the organic food realm and to maintain conceptual clarity, construct validity was not tested further (e.g., by performing the CFA). Finally, the mediation analysis using the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates and 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was performed to determine whether the participants' organic food attitudes mediate the relationship between the values (IVs) and consumer impressions (DV).

3.5 Validity and reliability of the research

When assessing the credibility of the research, the concepts of validity and reliability cannot be ignored. Validity refers to the fact what is measured is what was intended. It is further common to make a distinction between external and internal validity (see Creswell, 2013). The former relates to the extent to which the results can be generalized (to another place, population, or time). Several methodical choices were made to ensure that the external validity would remain at the high level. For instance, in most of the datasets, the sexes are equally represented. On the other hand, the collected samples do not represent the Finnish population on average: university students and people from urban areas are over-represented. However, student consumer samples are widely accepted and commonly used respondent source in the field of consumer research (e.g., Dubois et al., 2012; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). In addition, the current work does not at any point attempt to describe the census population but rather to test new theoretical ideas concerning the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling with robust methods among credible consumer samples.

Internal validity, in turn, relates to the consistency of the applied theoretical concepts, created experimental setups, and selected measuring instruments (Creswell, 2013). Several choices made in this thesis speak to its high quality. First, the key concepts of the study (e.g., prosocial status signaling) were drawn from existing theories (the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory – see Soler, 2012; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997), and the previous consumer research literature described similar applications (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010). That is, the suggested relationships between IVs and DVs, as well as potential moderators and mediators, were not irrational in light of the existing knowledge. Second, most of the measuring instruments (or their modifications) used in the work, such as the Short Schwartz's Value Survey (see Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005) and Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions, have been validated and tested in distinct socio-cultural contexts.

Third, a number of pre-tests and manipulation checks were carried out prior to the actual studies to minimize errors and testing the rationale. As already stated, the capability of the status word list (vs. the control word list) used in Experiments 1 and 2 to elicit a desire for status in people was verified on a separate sample before the actual data collection by applying Eastman et al.'s (1999) status consumption statements. Similarly, the ability of the organic food products (vs. their conventional counterparts) used in Experiment 1 to signal prosociality was successfully pre-tested with a large sample. This confirmation also provided

concrete support for the logic (i.e., the user imagery approach) used in Experiment 4.

The visibility and associated meanings of the subtle organic logo (a ladybug on a white T-shirt) used in Experiment 3 were also checked using a separate sample in the both data collection areas (i.e., an urban mall and rural food fairs). In addition, each of the questionnaires used in the experiments was pre-tested by giving it to several people with different socio-demographic backgrounds to verify its functionality before moving on to the large-scale study. Fourth, the role of the data collectors as improvers of internal validity cannot be overstated. Excluding Experiment 4 (involving an online platform provided by a professional market research company), there were always more than one researcher on site to ensure that the procedure went as planned. The author of this thesis, for example, was always present when experimental data were collected.

Reliability, in turn, relates to the stability of repeated measurements (i.e., the robustness of the instrument used). In quantitative research, reliability can be measured in the following ways (Metsämuuronen, 2005). First, reliability of alternative forms refers to the similarity of simultaneous measurement results when performed with different methods. Second, testing-retesting reliability refers to how similar the results are if the measurement is repeated with the same methods after some time has elapsed. Third, the reliability of internal consistency refers to the suitability of single-item measures in forming multi-item measures. It is typically measured by Cronbach's alpha; the closer the Alpha's value is to 1, the higher the internal consistency (Bonett & Wright, 2014).

In the current work, reliability was measured through internal consistency. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cronbach's alphas were checked throughout the articles. For example, alphas were calculated for the created index measures, when the functionality of the priming tool was verified (A1), when the consumer images were investigated (A2 & A3), and when the study participants' personal value priorities were determined (A3). In these tests, the alphas ranged from .659 to .947, indicating good reliability (Bonett & Wright, 2014).

4 SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

In this chapter, the three articles presented in this work are briefly explained. In a nutshell, their main ideas, theoretical building blocks, and most intriguing findings are presented. The believed novelty value of each paper (both conceptual and empirical) is summarized at the end of every sub-chapter. The intended contributions (both general and article-specific) were specified in the introduction part (Chapter 1.2). The implications of these articles will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

4.1 Article 1: Sending the prosocial status signal

The paper seeks to examine how activating a non-conscious status motive affects, on the one hand, preferring organic food and, on the other hand, senso-emotional experience. This article also investigates whether the social visibility of the choice and tasting situation moderates these effects. Because the current research recognizes the link between prosocial acts and status signaling, it is expected that eliciting a desire for status will 1) increase the preference for organic food and 2) improve senso-emotional experience and that 3) a situation visible to others will further boost both of these effects.

The theoretical grounding of the article is based on the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory, according to which sustainable choices (e.g., organic food) can signal not only prosocial, altruistic tendencies but also greater resources (cf. wealth) and a willingness to sacrifice them for the benefit of others. In other words, it is assumed that organic foods can confer these socially valued traits because favoring them can be viewed as a costly signal of prosociality. However, for any behavioral strategy to qualify as such a signal, certain criteria must be met; the paper presents evidence to support the claim that organic food consumption can indeed meet these criteria.

The idea that prosocial status signaling – “the going green to be seen” effect – can, in addition to the evaluative and behavioral domains (e.g., product choices and purchase intentions), manifest itself at the level of more physiology-driven food responses is justified through (in)congruity accounts. Accordingly, people are inclined to like entities (e.g., products and brands) that have congruent symbolism with their self-concepts and vice versa – (mis)match between human motivations and the symbolism of the object can even increase or decrease the sensory pleasantness of food.

In order to tackle these issues, three experiments were carried out by applying the priming methodology. In a nutshell, after hearing the cover story (a memory recall task) and receiving non-conscious status priming (status-related words vs. neutral control words), study participants had to make a choice between organic food products and their conventionally produced counterparts (Experiments 1 and 2) and taste a food sample presented as organically vs. conventionally produced and evaluate it in terms of certain senso-emotional properties (Experiment 3); the social visibility of the choice and tasting situation was altered (public vs. private).

It was found that eliciting a desire for status increased the preference for organic food (vs. conventional food) when the choice was made in a private situation. Contrary to what was expected, the public situation did not further boost this effect. However, the analyses revealed an interesting detail, namely that the social visibility of the choice, in itself, created the same effect as priming status motives did (i.e., it caused participants to favor organic options). Contrary to the prediction, activating status motives did not create an improved senso-emotional experience of the food believed to be organic when tasted in a private situation. However, when the situation was visible to others – some of the participants were led to believe that they would have to share their food responses with the researchers at the end of the experiment – a significant and predicted effect emerged. That is, the food sample served as organic (carrot in grated form) not only tasted better but also created more intense emotions of joy and hopefulness (as compared to the same food sample without priming status). It is noteworthy that the carrot sample presented as organic was, in reality, produced via conventional farming methods.

The results indicate that food consumers seem to go green for reputational reasons. Thus, activating status motives may be a promising way to encourage more sustainable consumption behavior. The question of the extent to which organic foods are actually favored for socially disapproved consumption motives, such as reputation management, also presents itself. Table 2 illustrates the findings that are believed to be new (or at least less researched) in relation to the previous literature. The present article, “*Sweet taste of prosocial status signaling: When eating organic foods makes you happy and hopeful,*” was published in *Appetite* in 2018.

Table 2. Novelty value of Article 1

Conceptual novelty value	Empirical novelty value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - application of the costly signaling theory in an affective response context - integrating the ideas of goal-directed priming and food-elicited emotion theories with (in)congruity accounts - linking prosocial status signaling to the senso-emotional experience of organic food 	<p>Methodological choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on effects of status motive activation on mundane (perishable food) choices - focus on consumers' non-conscious decision making - focus on motivational priming effects beyond the evaluative and behavioral domains <p>Key results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - making the reputational concerns salient – status motive activation or/and situation visible to others – caused consumers to prefer organic food and improved the associated senso-emotional experience

4.2 Article 2: Interpreting the prosocial status signal in various socio-cultural contexts

The aim of this paper is to study prosocial intra-male signaling through favoring organic food in distinct Finnish socio-cultural contexts. Although status signaling through consumption choices, in the realm of sustainable acts, for example, is a well-researched topic, the sex dynamics of such signaling are often ignored. In light of evolutionary accounts, this is limiting. Because the current research suggests that men are prone to make sharp “us” vs. “them” interpretations of other men, possibly due to the competitive and violent history of the human race, it is suggested here that a pro-organic male signaler will be viewed differently – materializing in more vs. less positive inferences and (un)favorable treatment – depending on whether the signaling occurs in an urban or rural setting.

This article draws strongly from evolutionary psychology research. The main theoretical building block is, as in the case of Article 1, the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory, according to which sustainable choices (e.g., organic food) can signal both prosociality and greater resources (cf. wealth) and a willingness to use them for the benefit of one's fellow people. It is again suggested that organic foods can confer these socially valued traits because

favoring them can be viewed as a costly signal of prosociality. However, in order to be qualified as such, the four above-mentioned criteria must be met. Unlike Article 1, the current paper empirically tests whether organic food consumption can truly meet these criteria.

The paper also draws from studies of parochial altruism, according to which people are naturally sensitive to make bimodal in-group vs. out-group interpretations of other people and react to them accordingly. People who are considered members of the in-group often receive favorable, altruistic treatment, while those who are seen as members of the out-group can even be infrahumanized. This behavior is typical of same-sex interactions, especially between males. In addition, insights are also adopted from other evolution-driven intra-male signaling conversations (e.g., coalition formation).

In order to tackle these issues, two identical experiments (in urban and rural settings) were conducted via intercept methods. In a nutshell, participants (all were men) were shown a picture of a man (in the questionnaire) who was making a green salad and signaled (or did not signal) his status through favoring organic food. Then, they had to form an image of this man in terms of several desirable traits (perception testing) and donate a hypothetical amount of money to this person (treatment testing). It was found that in the urban socio-cultural area, men perceived the pro-organic signaler more positively, viewing him as more respected and altruistic and giving statistically greater charity donations as compared to a corresponding non-signaler. In the rural socio-cultural area, the results were very different. The pro-organic signaler was less respected and he received smaller donations from male observers as compared to a corresponding non-signaler.

The results indicate that organic foods possess strong reputational signal value. Specifically, in certain socio-cultural contexts, favoring them is not only a way to attain status but can even create positive behavioral implications. A question arises regarding the extent to which this everyday habit is viewed as a merit in real-life social interactions, such as friendship, ally, leader, or even romantic partner selections. The results derived in the urban context provide support for the basic premise of this work: the everyday behavior strategy of favoring organic food can be viewed as a costly signaling trait because it is visible (Criterion 1), costly to produce (Criterion 2), associated with status (Criterion 3), and ultimately beneficial for the signaler (Criterion 4). Table 3 illustrates what is believed to be new (or at least less researched) in relation to the previous literature. The present article, "*Male-male status signaling through favoring organic foods: Is the signaler perceived and treated as a friend or a foe?*" was published in *Psychology & Marketing* in 2016.

Table 3. Novelty value of Article 2

Conceptual novelty value	Empirical novelty value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - application of the costly signaling theory in a mundane consumption context - integrating the ideas of costly signaling and parochial altruism with research on intra-male competition - fusion of insights from evolutionary and socio-culturally driven research disciplines 	<p>Methodological choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - operating in a new signaling field (organic food) with implicit methods - focus on observation of the signaling, which is less researched - focus on the often-ignored sex dynamics of the signaling - focus on unresearched behavioral implications resulting from the prosocial signaling <p>Key results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a pro-organic male signaler was perceived and treated favorably among males witnessing the signaling in an urban but not a rural socio-cultural context - favoring organic food meets the four criteria for costly signaling

4.3 Article 3: Interpreting the prosocial status signal: the role of observer values

This paper seeks to investigate the extent to which organic food consumption confers socially highly valued characteristics among consumers with different worldviews. Although the current work has produced an understanding of the prosociality-related social signal value of favoring organic food, who truly values the consumers of such food – beyond the urban male-male context – remains unclear. By using Schwartz’s classic main values as IVs, this paper sheds lights on this issue. Because value orientations are known to be useful in predicting and even explaining prosocial behavior, it is suggested here that the impression of the organic consumer is dependent on the observer’s value base. Furthermore, because values, as abstract concepts, do not usually affect behaviors directly, it is further expected that such interpretation is mediated by more specific organic food attitudes.

The study draws on Schwartz’s thoroughly validated theory of values, which is grounded on three universal requirements of human existence: 1) the biological

needs of individuals, 2) coordinated social interaction between individuals, and 3) the survival and welfare needs of groups. One important feature of values is that they also guide our evaluations of our fellow people. At first glance, one might think that those who are the most pro-organic (i.e., people with self-transcendence and a universalistic worldview) are also those who perceive the organic consumer – a member of their in-group – most favorably. However, due to this valuable social signaling function, the case may be more complicated; in addition to “true believers,” “opportunist” or “rival” assessments are also possible. Furthermore, organic foods emit symbolism, which may also attract people with other value priorities. For this reason, the paper also draws from (in)congruity accounts and research on prosocial status signaling.

In order to investigate these issues, an experimental online study was conducted among the panelists of a Finnish market research company in the Helsinki metropolitan area. In a nutshell, study participants had to evaluate – in line with the key tenets of the user imagery approach – a person who was presented as a regular user of organic vs. conventional foods in terms of certain socially valued characteristics. In addition, participants’ attitudes toward the food products studied were queried, and their value priorities were determined by applying Schwartz’s short, ten-item value survey (SSVS).

It was found that in general, regular users of organic food products were perceived as more prosocial than regular users of their conventional counterparts. It was also discovered that organic food consumption can confer other highly valued characteristics, such as sophistication. As expected, judgments regarding prosociality were dependent on a participant’s positioning in Schwartz’s value circumplex. Intriguingly, in addition to those people who endorse self-transcendent values, people with conservative value priorities also viewed the presumed organic consumer as prosocial. These impressions were further mediated by more specific organic food attitudes, thereby forming a value-attitude-impression relationship.

As in the previous articles, the results indicate that organic food consumption is associated with strong status symbolism. Partly in line with Article 2, the results suggest that among consumers with a certain worldview, the mundane habit of making prosocial food choices can be a way of becoming respected and honored. From a societal and managerial point of view, one particular question arises: How can conservative people’s positive attitudes towards organic food consumption be translated into purchasing behavior. Table 4 illustrates new (or at least less researched) findings in relation to the previous literature. The present article, *“Does organic food consumption signal prosociality?: An application of*

Schwartz's value theory," was published in *Journal of Food Products Marketing* in 2018.

Table 4. Novelty value of Article 3

Conceptual novelty value	Empirical novelty value
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - application of the Schwartz's value theory - application of the self-congruity theory - integrating values and (in)congruity accounts with research on prosocial status signaling - application of the value-attitude-behavior hierarchy in the impression-formation context 	<p>Methodological choices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on interpretation of the status signal, which is often overlooked - focus on values often overlooked in organic food research (e.g., conservatism) - taking the moderating role of organic food product type into account with regard to status signaling <p>Key results:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people who hold ethical and conservative value priorities viewed the presumed organic food consumer as prosocial – these impressions were mediated by more specific organic food attitudes

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the previous sections of the dissertation, the phenomenon of prosocial status signaling through organic food consumption has been captured both conceptually and empirically. In this final chapter, the theoretical and practical implications of this journey, together with study limitations and future research suggestions, are discussed in more detail.

5.1 Theoretical implications

Status considerations have rarely been mentioned together with organic food consumption. However, some indications of the reputational signal value of favoring organic food have been received during the past decade (e.g., Carfagna et al., 2014; Cervellon & Shammas, 2013; Costa et al., 2014; Elliot, 2013; Fifita et al., 2019; Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007; Rana & Paul, 2017). On the other hand, totally opposite indications have been obtained as well. To illustrate, some researchers report that shoppers purchase organic foods just as automatically and effortlessly as their conventionally produced counterparts (Thøgersen et al., 2012), which is not a hallmark of a vehicle of prosocial status signaling. Furthermore, there are also many consumers who do not appreciate organic farming methods (Bellows et al., 2010). Through three separate but closely interlinked articles, the current work has clarified this issue (i.e., the true social signal value of organic food choices).

In short, it was found that 1) status motives increase the preference for organic food (A1); 2) men (dis)respect pro-organic male signalers (A2); and 3) organic food consumption can confer a number of socially valued characteristics, including prosociality (A3). These results indicate that a substantially strong status symbolism encompasses organic food. In Article 1, in fact, the social visibility of the choice itself caused consumers to favor organic food options significantly more. This raises the question of the extent to which organic foods are favored for motives other than the typically self-reported and socially approved reasons of tastiness, healthiness, food safety, and various ethical aspects (e.g., Hemmerling et al., 2015). Based on these findings, the consumer segment that considers “reputation management” an important choice criterion may be substantial (cf. Delgado et al., 2015).

Self-determination theory, which suggests that individuals have intrinsic (inherent satisfaction) and extrinsic (separate rewards) motivations and explains their interactions with the social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000), may help researchers approach the questions of what purchase motives are important and in what kind of situations they are important. Studies applying this theory have

found that extrinsic motivations (vs. intrinsic), such as increased social reputation, more effectively drive consumers to purchase green products (Koo, Chung, & Nam, 2015). In any case, future studies are encouraged to take socially disapproved motives into account more strongly when investigating not just organic food consumption, but all behaviors involving the aspect of prosociality.

Regarding this suggestion, it is important to further stress that it is not meaningless whether direct or indirect research methods are used – explicit and implicit perceptions of the same object can be vastly different (Raghunathan et al., 2006). The current thesis relied primarily on the latter for three reasons: 1) through indirect methods, it is possible to capture the fundamental motives of human behavior (e.g., desire for status, as in Anderson et al., 2015); 2) strong moral reservations are associated with status-driven acts in Scandinavia (cf. response bias, as in Sørtheix & Lönnqvist, 2014), and 3) a great deal of what happens in the food and eating realms is believed to occur automatically (cf. nonconsciously, as in Köster, 2009; Wansink & Sobal, 2007). In line with these notions, two out of the three articles applied either fully (A1) or almost fully (A2) implicit (i.e., indirect) methods. In the third paper (A3, online platform), in contrast, the asking logic was explicit (i.e., direct), although the actual purpose of the study was not revealed. That is, probably only a few, if any, of the participants understood that the aim of the study was to study consumer impressions of organic foods.

In Article 1 (A1), non-conscious status-priming boosted organic food choices and improved the associated senso-emotional experience. Similarly, in Article 2 (A2), showing a subtle organic logo on a T-shirt in an otherwise information-rich picture – in line with the well-acknowledged principles of implicit priming; see Brasel & Gips, 2011; Park & John, 2014 – created statistically distinct perceptual inferences and behavioral implications. In Article 3 (A3), in which the study purpose was concealed, significant differences in impression emerged with respect to many socially valued characteristics. The key message here is that future studies should predominantly utilize methodologies that are capable of tapping into consumers' non-conscious processes and responses. If the research topic is socially and morally sensitive (cf. prosocial status signaling), the application of such indirect methods is virtually imperative. In addition to many forms of content and process priming (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014), neuroscience (Hammou, Galib, & Melloul, 2013) and nudging (Wilson et al., 2016) provide potential tools with which to capture such responses.

Along with the traditional consumer research literature, the work was strongly influenced by the evolutionary psychology research domain (see Durante &

Griskevicius, 2018; Saad, 2017). To be more precise, it was suggested throughout the articles that status symbolism encompasses organic foods because favoring them can be perceived as a costly signal of prosociality (see Soler, 2012). It was also empirically verified (A2) through four criteria (see Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005) that this everyday behavioral tendency can be qualified as such. It has been shown previously that favoring premium-priced brands – engendering respect and favorable treatment at hands of observers – can act as a costly signal (Lee et al., 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Similarly, Griskevicius et al. (2010) suggest that favoring green durables could function as costly signal, although they did not empirically verify that the four criteria were met. The thesis's finding that as everyday acts, organic food choices (i.e., perishables) can serve as vehicles with which consumers can signal their underlying qualities – materializing even at the level of more physiology-driven food responses (A1) – provides an update to the debates over status signaling and Darwinian consumer research.

In practice, these results could indicate that a tendency to favor organic foods is not only a way to be respected and appreciated in the eyes of fellow people. It can even cause others to treat the favorer more positively, at least in societies with certain demographic and psychographic characteristics (A2 & A3). This raises the provocative question of whether organic food consumers are actually treated more favorably in real-life social interactions? For example, are they preferred more in group leader, business partner, and romantic companion selection? This is an empirical question worth pursuing.

Another major update provided by this thesis concerns the sex-specificities of status signaling. Data have recently been accumulated to show that sex-specificities (inter-sex and intra-sex) truly matter in the domain of luxury choices: premium-priced brands can be used to signal ones' mate value (male-female emphasis – Janssens et al., 2011; Sundie et al., 2011) or to protect one's romantic relationships (female-female emphasis – Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). When confronting a physically dominant male employee in a store, male customers (as opposed to women) are inclined to spend more money on status-signaling – in the spirit of compensation caused by intra-sexual competitiveness – such as preferring larger brand logos (Otterbring et al., 2018). In the realm of prosocial acts, understanding is scarcer. However, it is known that men are prone to contribute more to “good causes” if there are female observers present (e.g., Vugt & Iredale, 2013). As for the prosocial status signaling discovered between men in Article 2 (A2), however, no previous similar evidence can be found. The most important message here is that consumer researchers should not ignore sex-specificities when investigating status signaling through openly indulgent or more prosocial consumption choices (see Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015).

One goal of the work was to produce a novel insight within the priming literature (see Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014). As discussed in Chapter 2.3.2, motivational (goal-directed) priming has yielded intriguing effects in the domain of consumer research. In the food realm, it is well documented that activating a non-conscious goal (e.g., status, health, or sustainability) can affect consumers' subsequent behaviors and choices (Dubois et al., 2012; Ohtomo, 2017; Tate et al., 2014). Its effects on consumers' sensory-level food experience, however, have not been elucidated, though the previously cited study by Irmak et al. (2005) may come the closest. Hence, the findings of Article 1 (A1) regarding consumers' physiology-driven (i.e., affective) food responses after priming status provide an extension of the literature on motivational priming.

Alternative explanations for the obtained findings cannot be ignored. Specifically, the fact that organic foods can confer prosocial status symbolism has primarily been explained through the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory. However, because it originates from Darwin's sexual selection, it may not be perfectly suited to understanding how prosocial behaviors such as organic food consumption serve reputation management (A1 & A3) and coalition formation (A2) within social networks devoid of mating concerns. Notions of reciprocal altruism (Kurzban, Burton-Chellew, & West, 2015) and indirect reciprocity (Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016) provide alternative evolutionary lenses through which to view the phenomenon.

The latter theory in particular may be capable of explaining at least a part of the findings because in many ways, it overlaps with the notion of competitive altruism, even though the ultimate function of a prosocial reputation is different (signaling an underlying quality vs. motivating others to cooperate). Its basic principle is that a member of a social network can attain a good reputation by behaving altruistically and thus receive indirect benefits later from the other members of the network. When applying this conceptualization, Wu et al. (2016) discovered that people are more generous when the recipient is believed to be socially well-connected, thus possessing a great potential for gossiping. If this insight is applied, for example, to the results of Article two (A2), perceiving organic food favorers as prosocial may evoke the belief that they also play an influential role in the social network. From an evolutionary point of view, it is wise to treat such individuals nicely because they may gossip about such actions to others in the network. This, in turn, enhances one's own reputation and thus increases others' willingness to cooperate.

Many theories dealing with the realm of green consumption, such as social dilemma theory (e.g., Gleim et al., 2013) or rational choice theory (e.g., Welsch &

Kühling, 2011), suggest that consumers typically conduct a kind of “cost-benefit analysis” in their minds regarding whether to go green (considering the perceived environmental effectiveness of the choice and the perceived costliness of the input). In other words, they seek a certain balance in the exchange. For this reason, equity theory may be another promising conceptualization with which to understand the findings of the thesis, without evolutionary accounts. In their recent application of the theory, Ross and Kapitan (2018) argue that the main motivational force behind prosocial consumption is how much consumers perceive they have given to and received from the marketplace. In line with this logic, it is possible to speculate that by unnecessarily depleting their own resources (organic options possess substantial price premiums, and their availability is, in many categories, more limited) for the benefit of others, pro-organic consumers put themselves in an imbalanced position. That is, they give more to the marketplace than they get from it. However, they may think that this imbalance can be righted by the benefits – reputational and behavioral – that organic food consumption ultimately creates.

In short, it is possible that some other conceptualization could have been as appropriate as the theory of costly signaling (CST) in explaining the investigated phenomenon (i.e., prosocial status signaling in the context of organic food consumption). What could it be and would it offer as detailed explanation as the costly signaling framework did, is an issue that is left for consumer researchers to ponder. Another important message here is that the phenomenon should be captured through a tandem of evolutionary and more socio-culturally driven perspectives. As the current work has shown, these disciplines are not mutually exclusive. In fact, evolutionary scientists presume that social learning is a function of evolutionary constraints.

In practice, merging the ideas of indirect reciprocity (IR) with the ideas of social network theory (SNT) could be a fruitful way to advance this integration because they both deal with human social networks. The latter conceptualization (see Kadushin, 2004) describes social structures as a function of networks of relationships – social networks contain objects (nodes) and relationships that link the objects (pairs). The SNT suggests that network characteristics are helpful in explaining green purchase behaviors (see MacDonald & She, 2015). The application of IR with the SNT could focus on the extent to which one’s seemingly prosocial acts generate reciprocal benefits through indirect mechanisms in complex social networks (e.g., pro-organic and green societies with distinct characteristics on social media).

Finally, above, the interplay between prosocial acts and status concerns has primarily been discussed in relation to organic food. It is important to remember that these are only a part of the bigger “green picture.” Green consumerism has a long, rich research tradition (see Groening et al., 2018). During the past decades, a number of theories have been applied in an attempt to understand this phenomenon. In a nutshell, this research concludes that increasing the sale of green options is challenging: such options cannot be marketed by using the same strategies as used with non-green goods. To illustrate, consumers typically self-report that they will prefer green goods, but in reality, they are not willing to pay the price premium. Even a high-level positive environmental attitude does not strongly correlate with green purchases. Humans’ tendencies to prioritize selfishness and adopt a short-term focus (vs. a long-term focus) may serve as barriers to increasing their popularity (Griskevicius et al., 2012). Consumers also have doubts about the quality and effectiveness of green alternatives, as well as the manufacturers’ true commitment to the environment. Their more limited availability and higher levels of innovativeness, as well as governmental legislation, also create challenges in mainstreaming green consumerism.

According to Groening et al. (2018), the conceptualizations applied by scholars can be divided into six main categories. Green consumerism has been approached in relation to values and knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and social dimensions. However, in many cases, consumers’ green decision-making has been captured through multi-theoretic lenses (i.e., some combination of the previous categories) due to the fact that during the decision-making process, the consumer typically takes a number of cognitive and behavioral steps (Schaefer & Crane, 2005). The current thesis is in the last category, dealing with social group pressures and the reputational aspects of green consumerism. In addition to the aforementioned theoretical proposals, the key message here for researchers operating in the green consumption realm is that ego-centric, social standing-related drivers should not be ignored when the phenomenon is approached. The data suggest that when one’s reputation is at stake, he or she appears to go green eagerly.

In addition to the CST, Groening et al. (2018) place three other theories in the category dealing with the social dimensions of green consumerism: Consumer culture theory (see Arnould & Thompson, 2005), role theory (RT), and the SNT, which was described above. Of these, RT, in particular, may be useful when searching for further explanations of the key findings of this work. The theory suggest that people have social positions, which create social expectations regarding their behaviors. RT both predicts and explains individuals’ social behaviors based on situations and identities (Biddle, 2013). Because roles manifest

as a combination of many norms, beliefs, values, and attitudes, several sub-categories of RT exist. Gender role theory, for example, suggests that because women are more nurturing, they possess a greater concern for environmental issues and thus a greater willingness to pay extra for green products (Han, Hsu, & Lee, 2009).

If these ideas are applied to the realm considered in this work, one could propose that urban vs. rural residents behave in ways that are inherent to their socio-cultural contexts when forming perceptions of pro-organic consumers (A2). In rural areas, people tend to take a negative view in relation to organic food, potentially because in Finland, organic farming (vs. traditional farming) was previously considered a stigmatized activity. It was viewed as primarily practiced by out-group members, “city-hippies” from a very different socio-cultural realm (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019; Siltaoja et al., 2015). The final message here is that even in prosperous Western countries, where sustainability is generally perceived as a good thing and worth supporting, the role of socio-cultural context as a shaper of green consumerism should not be underestimated.

5.2 Limitations and future research suggestions

As in the case of every study, several limitations can be identified. At the same time, these offer fruitful opportunities for further research.

First, it has been suggested throughout the work that prosocial status signaling may occur largely non-consciously. Although the implicit effects of environmental cues on consumer behavior have been documented (Berger & Fitzsimons, 2008; see also Wilson et al., 2016) and a number of methodological choices were deliberately made to favor the occurrence of nonconscious responding (e.g., subtle priming and cover stories), we cannot be sure of whether the “going green to be seen” effects emerged non-consciously, consciously, or in combination. This is especially true in the case of the second (A2) and the third (A3) articles (i.e., observing the consumption signal). In other words, more understanding is needed about the dynamics of the non-conscious and conscious processes of prosocial status signaling in the consumer’s mind. Shedding light on this necessitates the use of objective methods, such as the neuromarketing approach (see Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012). The findings of Lee et al. (2013) illustrate the potential of this method well. After their study participants were primed with two advertisement texts (one promoting a green options and the other promoting a non-green option), the EEG theta activity in the frontal brain was different between the green and non-green consumers.

Second, even though the thesis has produced intriguing sex-specific findings about the perceptions and behavioral implications created by organic food consumption (A2), in this regard, it operated solely in the intra-male realm. In other words, we do not know how a pro-organic female signaler would be perceived and treated by either a female or male signal receiver (this also holds for a male signaler and a female receiver). That is, before the final conclusions can be drawn regarding the sex-specificities of prosocial status signaling, these other sex combinations must be explored. The intra-female realm, in particular, is intriguing. In addition to increasing one's own social standing (cf. Durante et al., 2014), what other fundamental motives might women possess to send a status signal through a prosocial choice to other women? Would this signaling female be a foe, rather than a friend, in the eyes of other females? These questions are left for future researchers to ponder.

Third, it must be acknowledged that only hypothetical scenarios were tested. This is the key limitation of the work. The treatment measured, for example, was not based on actual behavior but self-reported behavioral intentions. Thus, the behavioral implications created by prosocial status signaling must be investigated in a naturalistic context (i.e., observers' real actions toward the signal sender), for instance, by collecting charity donations (e.g., while wearing a pro-organic or green cap) for local children's foundations (cf. Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Dictator and public goods games conducted in controlled laboratory settings provide another tool with which to validate the findings (cf. Milinski et al., 2006; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013). Similarly, although status motives caused consumers to favor organic food options over their conventionally produced counterparts (A1), actual purchases were not measured, but hypothetical product choices were. Regarding perceptual inferences, the case is the same. Actual organic food consumption was not investigated, but stated preferences were (A3). Consequently, the effects of eliciting status concerns on organic food choices must be studied in a real retail environment with methods involving actual purchases. The same principle should be followed (i.e., using a real shopping context) when further validating the usage impressions of organic vs. conventional foods. In fact, due to the point that in reality, consumers are rarely willing to pay the price premiums required for green options (see Groening et al., 2018), it appears to be imperative that the "going green to be seen" phenomenon is approached in an actual retail store context (cf. McDonald et al., 2012).

Fourth, it is noteworthy that the studied organic food products did not confer prosociality or other socially valued traits to exactly the same extent, although the indications of the effects were always evident (A3). It is known that the market shares of organic food differ substantially between product categories (Juhl,

Fenger, & Thøgersen, 2017). Moreover, the typically positive organic label halo effect does not hold in all categories; organic vice foods, for example, are perceived as less tasty than their conventionally produced alternatives (Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). For this reason, product categories with profoundly different symbolic connotations, such as the less socially approved of alcohol, emotionally charged chocolate (Thomson et al., 2010), or more up-scale product types (e.g., special cooking oils), should be explored. Peattie's (1999) perception matrix may represent a potential conceptual tool with which to approach this issue because it allows researchers to classify various green products (Young et al., 2010). Are some organic product types perceived as clearly less prosocial or environmental friendly than others, and is the degree of compromise involved in purchasing them (vs. non-green options) viewed differently in the case of certain categories (cf. Olsen, 2013)? To what extent are other prosocial consumption forms, such as fair trade (Coppola et al., 2017; Kimura et al., 2012) or local (Memery et al., 2015) or even vegan foods (see Lundahl, 2018), capable to conferring underlying qualities? How do various product types interact with perceptions? The inclusion of only one form of prosocial consumption – organically produced food – is a clear limitation of the current thesis.

Fifth, the work has identified several moderators of prosocial status signaling relating to both the sending and interpreting of the signal, such as social visibility (A1), sex dynamics (A2), socio-cultural context (A2), and observers' value base (A3). As discussed above, some indications were also found that the product type of organic food can be influential in this regard (A3). Are there still other moderators? In addition to personal values, other psychological characteristics could qualify as moderators. Narcissists, for instance, are prone to favor expensive green goods due to the prestigious image they confer (Naderi & Strutton, 2015). More specific environmental identities (see Brick et al., 2017) represent additional candidates for moderators. Furthermore, the informants in the thesis did not fully correspond with the Finnish census population: comparatively highly educated urban consumers, along with university students (cf. a convenience sample), were over-represented. Although this is a common problem in the domain of consumer research (see Peterson & Merunka, 2014), it is highly encouraged that all conducted experiments be replicated among consumers with clearly different socio-economic backgrounds, such as blue-collar workers or distinct lifestyle groups, and outside the Nordic consumption context.

Finally, it has been suggested throughout the work that the prosocial costly signal of favoring organic food is associated with certain underlying qualities of an individual, such as altruism-driven status and wealth. Is this really the whole story? Namely, it is well-documented that healthiness is one of the key motives

self-reported by consumers who opt for organic foods (e.g., Apaolaza et al., 2018), even though it has not been unambiguously (i.e., scientifically) proven that these foods are healthier than conventionally produced foods (see Olson, 2017). Hence, a provocative research question arises: are pro-organic consumers also perceived as being healthier than other consumers? In any case, future research should more clearly identify the exact qualities being signaled through organic and green choices. It is possible that altruistic tendencies and the possession of greater resources are not the key elements of the message that has been transmitted through prosocial status signaling. To illustrate, several stable personality traits (e.g., the Big Five and their sub-traits) are closely related to altruism and the capability to generate wealth – agreeableness and conscientiousness in particular (cf. Miller, 2009). Whether these traits (or some of their sub-items) are indicated by one’s prosocial choices is a question for scholars beyond the consumer research domain to explore.

5.3 Practical implications

The understanding this thesis has produced regarding the reputational signal value of organic food consumption creates several opportunities for retailers, marketers, and policy makers⁵. To be more precise, reasons have been provided why organic foods (and green goods more generally) do not sell better than they do, even though self-reported attitudes toward them are typically positive (Marian et al., 2014, p. 52). The primary barrier to increased organic purchases is their comparatively high prices. Reducing the price would increase such goods’ popularity (Bezawada & Pauwels, 2013), but due to their high production costs, this is not possible. The current work has revealed that organic food consumption can confer not only prosociality-related characteristics but also characteristics associated with more traditional high social status, such as affluence and sophistication – in line with “sustainable luxury” considerations (Cervellon & Shamma, 2013).

Thus, making reputational aspects more salient in the sales environment (e.g., clues capable of activating consumers’ status motives and more visible selling locations), may help boost the sales of organic foods despite their high prices (cf. Brick et al., 2017, p. 227; Rana & Paul, 2017). Furthermore, retailers could try to strengthen this idea by placing subtle “watching eyes” in their food sections. It has been suggested that prosocial choices increase when consumers sense that they are

⁵ The author of this work wishes to remind the reader once more about the existence of very recent studies suggesting that the implications of organic farming methods for the climate are not as positive as has been traditionally assumed – a combination of organic and conventional cultivation can actually be the greenest solution (see Searchinger et al., 2018). That is, from an ethical point of view, it is important that the managerial and societal actors dealing with the organic foods pay close attention to how this debate evolves scientifically.

being observed by others (see Pfattheicher & Keller, 2015). How these elements interact (i.e., status clues and more visible selling locations together with the feeling of being monitored in relation to preferring organic food) is a question worth answering in the retail environment (in particular due to its cost friendliness). There is no reason this idea could not be applied in the realm of green consumerism more generally (cf. a car dealership selling hybrids and electric vehicles).

Second, marketers of organic food products are encouraged to develop conspicuous solutions (green shopping bags, stickers, and competitions on social media) so that consumers have a better opportunity to signal their prosocial tendencies or other socially valued characteristics to others (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2016). Recall that simply making the choice situation visible to others (A1) was enough to expose the “going green to be seen effect.” In fact, when consumers are shopping, they should be persuaded (e.g., orally by the store personnel or via carefully planned and placed advertisement texts) to take these shopping bags with them when next time they come to the store. It is known that purchases of not only environmentally friendly organic foods but also indulgent foods can be increased if it is possible to bring one’s own shopping bag (see Karmarkar & Bollinger, 2015).

Third, because the findings of the thesis indicate that “organic can indeed be the new black,” with regard to the image positioning of stores selling mainly organic products, a transition toward “trendiness” and “luxurious” might be a promising direction in order to more effectively trigger prosocial status signaling behaviors (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2016). In light of the current understanding of green consumerism, this proposal is by no means counterintuitive. If this is the positioning chosen, then marketers are encouraged to refrain from excessive price-cuts and oversupply because these can mitigate the social signaling value of their offerings. In fact – counterintuitively – among some consumer segments, organic food options may be seen as more desirable if their prices are relative high and their availability is more limited (cf. Griskevicius et al., 2010).

Fourth, based on the findings of Article 3 (A3), those who hold conservative values may represent a potential consumer segment for organic foods. Some indications that this value base can go hand in hand with organic food choices have been found in other studies as well (e.g., Thøgersen et al., 2016). Consequently, marketers should create innovative solutions so that this segment’s positive attitudes relating to organic food consumption can be converted into purchase behaviors. To illustrate, the first step is to identify those consumers who hold a conservative worldview (e.g., by conducting careful customer data analysis). Then, organic foods should be promoted to these consumers (e.g., via tailored e-mail campaigns),

primarily through healthiness and food safety, which are appreciated by conservative people. In contrast, ethical or hedonistic elements should not be highlighted as strongly, because they represent less important symbols to this consumer segment. Retailers could follow the same basic idea (i.e., emphasizing the former and avoiding the latter) in stores located in areas where conservative values are generally believed to be cherished (e.g., rural areas). This last proposal is closely connected to the next implication.

Fifth, it was discovered (A2) that even within a culturally homogenous Nordic country (Finland), there are considerable variations in terms of how organic food consumption is viewed. Perception differences between urban and rural consumers cannot be ignored when planning marketing activities for these foods. To briefly illustrate, in a rural retail context, organic foods could be promoted through healthiness, food safety, and reasonable prices. They should be placed among conventional foods, and the organic labels on packages should not be too conspicuous (cf. the “brown to keep down” effect – Brick et al., 2017). In an urban retail context, in turn, organic options may increase in popularity if they are sold in separate and socially visible places with relatively high prices and distinctive organic information on their packages. This time, the core marketing message could stress ethical and other prosocial aspects of choosing these products. Another important message here is that although organic food consumption appears to be generally perceived positively, there are also other views. That is to say, as in all marketing, customer segmentation should not be forgotten when promoting these foods, in which many ethical, social, hedonistic, and health-related dimensions are intertwined.

Sixth, it was found that organic food consumption not only elucidates perceptions of socially valued characteristics but also creates behavioral implications among observers (at least in certain contexts). In addition to (un)favorable treatment, the question arises whether there are still other (managerially interesting) behaviors to which observing others’ actions can actually lead. One potential implication is imitation. According to the key tenets of classic social learning theory (Bandura, 1978), people learn from others through observing, imitating, and modelling. From studies applying behavioral priming, it is known, for example, that people may mimic the ice cream consumption behavior of a thin person but probably not that of an obese person (Johnston, 2002). The critical question here is how to convince consumers to imitate organic food favorers. One potential method is through social emotions. Recall that study participants (A1) responded to the taste of organically served food in a considerably emotional way after their reputational aspects were primed as salient. Antonetti and Maklan (2016) suggest that admiration and envy are central building blocks of emulative consumption. In

other words, it is possible that seeing others make organic food choices (or going green in general) can lead to admiring or envying, ultimately causing imitation. Practically, in order to trigger these social emotions, retailers must be cautious with their pricing, supply, and store placement strategies because these can be closely connected with the social status value of organic options. Beyond the organic food realm, marketers of green hotel services in particular (see Gao & Mattila, 2016) might benefit from this kind of thinking because socially highly charged travelling is one of those consumption domains that is capable of stirring up both admiration and envy.

Lastly, societal actors play a major role in advancing sustainable consumption habits. Governmental legislators, for instance, set restrictions on green products and their marketing. In other words, because policymakers participate as actors within social networks and consumer cultures through regulatory mechanisms, they can help spur the transition toward more sustainable consumption. For example, providing tax rebates and other incentives to those who decide to choose an environmentally friendly car, instead of more traditional one, has proven to be a relatively effective way to boost their sales (Descant, 2018). Setting various green standards, such as thoroughly scrutinized measures for recycling content and environmental performance, is suggested as another useful way to increase the popularity of sustainable behavior because these standards can create stronger feelings regarding actual environmental effectiveness (see Groening et al., 2018). In addition to these relatively effective means, it is suggested here that societal actors should also pay attention to the reputational symbolism associated with green consumption. It cannot be overemphasized that by going green, one can obtain a prosocial, altruistic reputation and simultaneously indicate one's financial resources – highly valued qualities in virtually all societies. Could highlighting these social dimensions possess some behavioral power in efforts to nudge citizens toward more sustainable choices (see Wilson et al., 2016)? This question is left for public policy makers and designers of green intervention campaigns to ponder.

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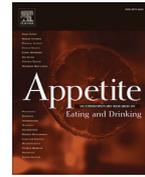
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Sweet taste of prosocial status signaling: When eating organic foods makes you happy and hopeful

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ABSTRACT

As the current research suggests that there are links between prosocial acts and status signaling (including sustainable consumer choices), we empirically study (with three experiments) whether food consumers go green to be seen. First, we examine how activating a motive for status influences prosocial organic food preferences. Then, we examine how the social visibility of the choice (private vs. public) affects these preferences. We found that when consumers' desire for status was elicited, they preferred organic food products significantly over their nonorganic counterparts; making the choice situation visible created the same effect. Finally, we go beyond consumers' evaluative and behavioral domains that have typically been addressed to investigate whether this (nonconscious) "going green to be seen" effect is also evident at the level of more physiologically-driven food responses. Indeed, status motives and reputational concerns created an improved senso-emotional experience of organic food. Specifically, when consumers were led to believe that they have to share their organic food taste experiences with others, an elevation could be detected not only in the pleasantness ratings but also in how joyful and hopeful they felt after eating a food sample. We claim that the reason for this is that a tendency to favor organic foods can be viewed as a costly signaling trait, leading to flaunting about one's prosocial tendencies. According to these findings, highlighting socially disapproved consumption motives, such as reputation management, may be an effective way to increase the relatively low sales of organic foods and thereby promote sustainable consumer behavior.

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1. Introduction

Current food consumption and production are not at a sustainable level (Reisch, Eberle, & Lorek, 2013): they contribute to climate change and environmental degradation (see Thøgersen, 2017). In fact, food is one of the three consumption domains, together with housing and transportation, with the most significant impact on the environment (cf. Tukker, 2015). Transitioning toward organic food consumption would offer a more sustainable alternative (see Scalco, Noventa, Sartori, & Ceschi, 2017). However, in spite of the positive general attitudes toward organically produced foods (see Marian, Chrysochou, Krystallis, & Thøgersen,

2014) their consumption has still remained relatively low. In the world's leading "organic country" (Denmark), the share of the consumed food accounted for by organic foods was 7.6% in 2014 (IFOAM, 2016). Although the share of organic food has steadily increased during the last years, this growth has remained moderate (see Lee & Hwang, 2016). The critical question, then, is how to increase this share and advance more sustainable food consumption?

The high price of organic food is often suggested to be the major barrier to increasing their consumption (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017; Jensen, Denver, & Zanolli, 2011; Magnusson, Arvola, Hursti, Aberg, & Sjoden, 2003; Padel & Foster, 2005). In the US, for example, it has been calculated that organic food is 40–175% more expensive than conventionally produced food (Magkos, Arvaniti, & Zampelas, 2006). Other barriers that have often been mentioned include availability problems (e.g., Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002) and lack of clarity relating to organic labels, such as skepticism and lack of trust toward them (Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017)

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or limited awareness about them (Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013). Why, then, are organically produced foods favored? The most common purchase reasons self-reported by consumers include superior taste, healthiness, food safety, animal welfare and environmental benefits (e.g., Boizot-Szantai, Hamza, & Soler, 2017; Hemmerling, Hamm, & Spiller, 2015) – the latter two can be considered to reflect prosocial, altruistic motives, whereas the former three are more selfish reasons (Kareklas, Carlson, & Muehling, 2014).

In the light of recent findings, it is however possible that organic foods are also favored due to other motives that are nonconscious or socially disapproved. We suggest that understanding these more socially oriented motives will reveal means to increase their popularity. The top purchase reasons for environmentally friendly hybrid cars have often been shown to be reputational (Maynard, 2007). In a similar vein, the major motive to participate in prosocial acts, such as charity donations (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013) or volunteering (Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2010), has in many cases been demonstrated to be status signaling. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this “prosocial status signaling” (i.e., attaining status through seemingly unselfish acts) is provided by the study of Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh (2010). It revealed that after the nonconscious status motives of the study participants were activated, they preferred less luxurious green products over more luxurious nongreen products across a wide range of product categories (cars, washing machines, table lamps, etc.). Inconsistent with traditional status-signaling views¹ (see Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006), but in line with the costly signaling theory (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Roberts, 1998; Soler, 2012), eliciting the desire for status led consumers to shy away from luxury and to choose an alternative that benefits everyone.

The previous discussion leads to the obvious question that we aim to study: can prosocial status signaling occur in the mundane consumption context of organic food? Considering that, in spite of the higher price, organic foods are shopped for as effortlessly and automatically as their conventionally produced alternatives (Thøgersen, Jørgensen, & Sandager, 2012), the idea that motivational priming increases preference for them sounds intriguing.

However, this is not necessarily the whole story. Nonconscious exposure to a well-known brand (cf. universally known organic foods) has been shown to be able to make people more creative. In a study by Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons (2008), Apple-primed study participants performed better in their appointed tasks than IBM-primed participants. In the food realm, when consumers' nonconscious status motives were activated, they started to signal their status through the size of food portions; exposure to a power prime got them to choose bigger food portions (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012).

Although there is now a body of research showing that activating a nonconscious goal can create a variety of reactions and responses, including food and eating-related behaviors (e.g., Schlosser, 2015; Sengupta & Zhou, 2007; Stöckli, Stämpfli, Messner, & Brunner, 2016), no evidence can be found for its effects on consumers' senso-emotional food experience (including traditional hedonic liking and more specific taste emotions). This is surprising particularly for two reasons. First, both sensory and emotional

reactions to foods have generated rich research fields during the last decades (see Köster & Mojet, 2015; Schouteten et al., 2017). Second, studies drawing from Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory – conducted in the sensory realm – have implied for some time that (in)congruity between food brands' symbolic content and consumers' values (cf. motivations) may lead to a distinct sensory level experience (Allen, Gupta, & Monnier, 2008; Paasoavaara, Luomala, Pohjanheimo, & Sandell, 2012). For this reason, we also aim to study whether prosocial status signaling – the “going green to be seen” effect – manifests in ways that go beyond well-established evaluative and behavioral domains. Well-acknowledged, usually positive impact of organic label on taste perception (e.g., Ellison, Duff, Wang, & White, 2016; Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013) makes focusing on this issue extremely interesting.

To conclude, we suggest in this paper – and we will empirically reveal through three experiments for the very first time – that nonconscious activating of desire for status leads prosocial status signaling through favoring organic foods, which also manifests – intriguingly – in improvements in their senso-emotional experience (see Thomson, 2007). During this process, we draw from the newest evolutionary psychology (see Saad, 2016), priming and food research. This integration of ideas from motivational priming, costly signaling, (in)congruity accounts and food-elicited effect theories to elucidate how status concerns, reputational goals and senso-emotional experiences uniquely combine in this mundane consumption context of organic food represents the major contribution of this study. Next, we open the conceptual underpinnings leading to three research hypotheses.

2. Conceptual underpinnings

2.1. Organic food as a costly signal

Even though status signaling and sustainable consumer choices seem poorly compatible with each other, recent research has shown that important links exist between them. When the New York Times reported the top five reasons for buying a hybrid Prius, concern for the environment was last on the list. Instead, the Prius owners proudly reported that the most important reason for buying one was because “it makes a statement about me” (Maynard, 2007). In a similar vein, the study of Griskevicius et al. (2010) revealed that after the study participants were primed with status motives, they preferred less luxurious green products over more luxurious nongreen products across a wide range of categories (e.g., cars, washing machines, table lamps). Status motives increased the desire for green products, especially when they were more (but not less) expensive than the nongreen products. Consumers' willingness to pay for a “green” signal and their status-motivated desire to display “austerity rather than ostentation” has been identified in other studies, too (Delgado, Harriger, & Khanna, 2015; Elliot, 2013; Sexton & Sexton, 2014; Van der Wal, Van Horen, & Grinstein, 2016).

Why then do consumers want to communicate about their status by favoring sustainable brands, products and services? It has been suggested (e.g., Maynard, 2007) that a person acting like this signals to others that he or she is a prosocial individual. Having a prosocial reputation can be extremely useful: people construed as cooperative and helpful are perceived as more desirable friends, allies, leaders and romantic partners (see Griskevicius et al., 2010). Thus, signaling about one's prosocial behavior may also be a viable strategy for attaining status. In other words, it offers an opportunity to be respected and honored in the peer group that, in turn, improves one's chances of attaining a leading position and the consequent resources.

¹ Consumers' tendency to signal about their status through consumption choices is an extensively researched topic. The vast majority of this research suggests that luxury brands, socially visible (expensive) consumer durables and the like “conspicuous products” are the main vehicles for such behaviors. Openly selfish motives, such as self-indulgence, are believed to motivate consumers to send a status signal.

In the light of these status-enhancing benefits, one might think that people would actually compete to be seen as being as prosocial as possible. Indeed, this has occurred throughout different cultures and time periods: this behavior is known as competitive altruism (e.g., Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Roberts, 1998). The existence of competitive altruism in human life is often explained through the lens of costly signaling theory (Zahavi, 1975). In the field of consumer research, it has been shown that favoring green (Griskevicius et al., 2010) and luxury products (Lee, Ko, & Megehee, 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) can act as costly signals of status. According to this perspective, an altruistic act communicates both about a person's prosociality and his/her ability to incur greater costs without a negative impact on fitness (cf. wealth) (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005).

Our key theoretical assumption is that favoring organic foods can also act as a costly signal of status. To qualify as such, however, four criteria must be met (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). First, the signal must be observable. Organic foods meet this criterion because they are equipped with distinct visual labels and are often placed in separate locations in grocery stores (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2016). The second criterion relates to the fact that the signal must be costly to display for the signaler. The price premium that consumers pay for organic foods (Magkos et al., 2006) makes them prototypical examples of costly signals. Furthermore, as the availability of organic foods is in many cases more limited than that of conventional foods (Hjelmar, 2011), consumers may have to sacrifice a considerable amount of time and energy resources to finding them. Organic food production is also strictly regulated (i.e., there are hardly any cheaper forgeries with better availability). The third criterion is that it must be associated with some unobservable, yet desirable quality of an individual such as good genes or physical health or some status-enhancing, socially highly valued trait. According to the final criterion, a costly signal must ultimately yield a fitness benefit to its signaler. This benefit derives from the effects of signaling about one's habits on the behavior of signal receivers.

Concrete support for the claim that the latter criteria are also met in the case of favoring organic foods has been received from the study of Puska, Kurki, Lähdesmäki, Siltaoja, and Luomala (2016). This experimental study revealed that a male who signaled about his status through favoring organic foods – compared to a male who did not – was not only perceived as more respected and altruistic (the third criterion), but was also more favorably treated. Sending this costly, prosocial signal led the males receiving the signal to donate more money to him in a charity donation task (the fourth criterion). Hence, also in this everyday, smaller price tag consumption context, the criteria are seen to be met well. To conclude, because the current research suggests that there are links between prosocial acts (including environmental behaviors) and competition for status – and because indications from the status-enhancing potential of favoring organic foods have been received – we hypothesize as follows:

H1. Activating consumers' status motives will increase the likelihood of preferring organic foods (compared to nonorganic foods).

2.2. Role of social visibility

According to costly signaling theory, one of the key factors in how status motives should influence one's decisions is the extent to which the choice situation is socially visible to others (cf. Kimura et al., 2012). Public purchases can conspicuously signal characteristics about the buyer to an immediate audience (i.e., to create reputational benefits). In contrast, if the purchases are made privately without any witnesses, the signaling aspects of the choice are much less salient (i.e., reputational benefits do not arise). As the

purchase of green products enables a person to signal that s/he is both willing and able to buy a product that benefits others at a cost to his/her personal resources, activating a motive for status might lead people to engage in conspicuous conservation (i.e., public proenvironmental act).

Indeed, in line with the previous assumption, Griskevicius et al. (2010) showed that activating status motives led people to choose green products over more luxurious nongreen products only when they imagine shopping in public (but not in private). When it comes to social visibility of prosocial acts in general (e.g., conservation, cooperation and charity) people appear to be particularly sensitive to it (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006; Brick, Sherman, & Kim, 2017). In the public goods game, for instance, it has been shown that people are prone to give money to preserve the environment only when the giving is public and can influence one's reputation (Milinski, Semmann, Krambeck, & Marotzke, 2006). To conclude, because in the public choice situation people have an opportunity to signal about their prosocial tendencies and considerable resources to others, we hypothesize as follows:

H2. When the choice situation is socially visible, activating the status motives further increases the likelihood of preferring organic foods (compared to a private situation).

2.3. *Senso-emotional experience of organic foods*

Although previous studies have not tackled the effects of activation of nonconscious consumption motive on consumers' senso-emotional food experience – traditional hedonic liking and experiencing more specific taste emotions – there are no reasons to assume that the “going green to be seen” effect would be limited to product choices. Exposure to well-known brands (cf. *organic food*), for instance, can work as a prime cue leading to goal-directed behavior (Fitzsimons et al., 2008). In the beverage context, it has been shown that after consuming a can of placebo energy drink, blood pressure increased significantly among the study participants with high performance motivation, but not among those with low performance motivation (Irmak, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2005).

Why, then, would status motives create an improved sensory level experience? To shed light on this issue, we turn our focus to consumer value – brand symbolism (in)congruity explanation model (see Allen et al., 2008). It starts from the premise that products and brands (cf. *organic food*) possess symbolic contents to which consumers are likely to react on the basis of some value – personal values are closely related to basic human motivations (see Grunert, Hieke, & Wills, 2014). Self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) suggests – the most relevant conceptual idea behind the thinking – that consumers prefer and choose products or brands with symbolic meanings that are congruent with their self-concepts. Incongruity, in turn, usually leads to an opposite effect. For the present study, the particularly relevant insight is that (in)congruity between food brands' symbolic meanings and ones' values can manifest itself in the (un)pleasantness of the taste experience (Allen et al., 2008; Pohjanheimo, Paasovaara, Luomala, & Sandell, 2010).

The study of Paasovaara et al. (2012) provides an illustrative example of the (in)congruity effects: it discovered that after priming a hedonistic value, the sensory perception of a yogurt brand carrying congruent symbolism was significantly elevated among consumers appreciating hedonism – this effect did not materialize when they tasted a yogurt brand signaling incongruent symbolism (i.e., conservatism).

In a similar way, we postulate that the (in)congruity effect can shape the senso-emotional experience of organic food. Specifically, the activation of consumers' status motive is assumed to trigger

their need to be respected and honored amongst the fellow peers. Consequently, the improvement of senso-emotional experience requires that organic foods emit symbolism congruent with this motive. We have contended throughout the manuscript that favoring them is associated with plenty of status-matching symbolism including socially highly-valued features of prosociality and affluence. On the other hand, also incongruity (e.g., the motivational conflict between self-enhancement and self-transcendence drivers – cf. Schwartz, 2010) can emerge – causing a less pleasant senso-emotional food experience. In any case, the (in)congruity theorization supports our rationale.

Senso-emotional experience, including more specific taste emotions, refers to a broader food experience that goes beyond general hedonic liking. The concept was introduced by Thomson (2007). Although sensory food research has traditionally relied on hedonic evaluation when producing understanding about consumers' food product experiences (Lawless & Heymann, 2010), broader views, going beyond liking, have recently gained more momentum (Gutjar et al., 2015; Ng, Chaya, & Hort, 2013; Schouteten et al., 2017); a major focus has been in emotional conceptualizations (Jiang, King, & Prinyawiwatkul, 2014; Köster & Mojet, 2015; Thomson & Crocker, 2015). This focus is not surprising per se because the interplay between the sensory properties of food and emotions is well-known. A sweet taste, for instance, can create positive emotions, whereas a bitter taste can evoke negative ones (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999); salty and sour, in turn, may elicit various emotional associations, such as surprise, sadness and fear (Rousmans, Robin, Dittmar, & Vernet-Maury, 2000).

The study of Thomson, Crocker, and Marketo (2010) illustrates well these complex conceptualizations, analyzing the relationships between the sensory characteristics of chocolates and emotions during tasting the products. In the study, one dark chocolate brand characterized by its sweet and creamy flavor yielded emotional associations such as fun, easy-going and comforting, while another dark chocolate brand with a bitter and coffee-like flavor was related to confidence, adventurousness and masculinity. In other words, tasting the food created specific “taste emotions” in the consumers' minds. We adopt this broader food experience view (including general liking and more specific taste emotions) for this paper.

Finally, it must be stressed that organic label (or other corresponding information) is known to have an impact on taste evaluation of food (see Bauer, Heinrich, & Schäfer, 2013; Bernard & Liu, 2017; Ellison et al., 2016). In the case of most food categories or types (vegetables, fresh foods, wines etc.) this so called “organic halo effect” is shown to be positive (i.e., higher pleasantness ratings), but some exceptions exist. Organic vice foods, such as sodas and cookies, are typically experienced as less tasty than their conventionally produced alternatives (Lee et al., 2013; Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). When tasting blind, however, consumers usually cannot say whether the food sample is produced using organic or conventional methods (e.g., Hughner et al., 2007).

To conclude, since tasting can create a broader food experience and because it is possible that activating a nonconscious goal may affect consumers' sensory food reactions – symbolism representing organic food, congruent with prosocial status considerations, heightens this possibility – we hypothesize as follows:

H3. Activating consumers' status motives will improve the senso-emotional experience of organic food and making the reputational aspects salient will further boost it.

In Fig. 1 we summarize the conceptual thinking of the study. Status motive activation not only increases preferring organic food, but also improves its senso-emotional experience. A socially visible choice and tasting situation boosts both of these prosocial status-signaling effects.

3. Experiment 1

3.1. Materials and method

The first study examined how activating a motive for status influences choices between proenvironmental organic food products and their nonorganic counterparts. As the current research suggests that there may be important links between displays of caring, environmental behaviors, and competition for status, we predicted that activating status motives should increase the likelihood of choosing more organic food products.

3.1.1. Participants, design and procedure

Eighty student consumers ($M_{\text{age}} = 26.1$ years, $SD = 3.83$, 50% of men, the most common (55%) household yearly income level 0–19999€), were approached with a questionnaire under the pretext of a memory recall task in a university library in a large Finnish city. First, they were escorted to a peaceful place where they completed the questionnaire (anonymously) at their own pace (approx. 15–20 min). The study had two between-subjects motive conditions: status ($n = 40$) and control ($n = 40$), in which the participants were selected randomly. No incentives for participation were given. The study participants were debriefed at the end of the experiment.

Status motives were elicited by showing participants a list of 20 words (on the first page), of which they should remember as many as possible; they were told that they would be asked about the words again at the end of the study (cf. Maio, Pakizeh, Cheung, & Rees, 2009). Among these nouns were embedded 12 words related to high status (luxury product, designer watch, first class, etc.). The participants had three minutes to look at the words (data collectors ensured that they looked at the words during the time allotted). The control condition was otherwise identical, but this time the noun list included only words without any kind of link to high status (backpack, table lamp, fraction, etc.). The participants in this condition also had to look at the words for three minutes. The status words had nothing to do with prosocial behavioral strategies, such as cooperation, helping, self-sacrifice or proenvironmental behavior.

3.1.2. Products

After the motive activation, and before the participants were allowed to make the product choices (approx. 6 cm × 9 cm images in color were used), they answered filler questions relating to use of technology. In this way, it was ensured that the participants would not understand the actual purpose of the study (post-study interviews did not reveal any suspiciousness). After these questions, the participants had to make dichotomous choices concerning six food product pairs: two product pairs contained an organic option (bacon and coffee). These product types were chosen for the study because they are both currently available in an organic and a conventional form – manufactured by the same company – and their package solutions were very similar. Counterbalanced product pairs (i.e., order of the two products varied) were always presented on their own pages. Price information was not shown at any time.

Regarding the other product pairs, in two pairs participants had to make a choice between a more luxurious product and its conventional version (cold cuts and blue cheese). This juxtaposition was included in the study for two reasons. First, we wanted to investigate whether activating a motive for status – in line with traditional status-signaling perspectives – would lead consumers to favor more luxurious and indulgent products over conventional ones (cf. Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Second, we wanted to have some initial confirmation that status activation would not simply lead people to favor options that are more *special*, *fashionable* or

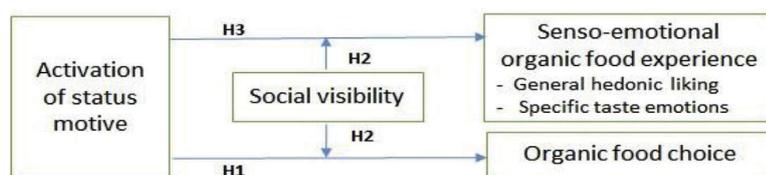


Fig. 1. Hypothesized effects of status motive activation and social visibility on choice and senso-emotional experience of organic food.

unique (cf. organic, luxurious vs. conventional) regardless of the actual product characteristics. Two more pairs (milk and cooking cream) were added as filler products to reduce the possibility that the participants would figure out that organic food products are the key interest of the study.

3.1.3. Pre-tests

We predicted that status motives should lead people to want to be seen as more prosocial, and thus it was important that both organic products were perceived as being associated with more prosociality than their nonorganic counterparts. We thus pretested the perceptions of both products with a separate group of 176 participants (88 men, 88 women). These participants saw either the organic products or the nonorganic products. For both of the products, participants indicated on a 1–9 scale the extent to which the person who favors this product was (a) nice, (b) caring, and (c) altruistic. As expected, compared to the nonorganic products, both organic products were associated with being nicer (M_s 5.94, $SD = 1.06$ vs. 5.21, $SD = 1.02$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.7$), more caring (M_s 6.40, $SD = 1.14$ vs. 4.41, $SD = 0.95$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.9$), and more altruistic (M_s 5.73, $SD = 1.11$ vs. 5.05, $SD = 0.99$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.65$). Thus, as expected, people who seemed to favor these organic products, relative to their nonorganic counterparts, were perceived as more prosocial.

It was also important to verify that the status word list (relative to the control word list) is capable to elicit desire for status. Thus another manipulation check was conducted with a separate group of 30 participants (15 men, 15 women). We used “status consumption statements” developed and validated by Eastman, Goldsmith, and Flynn (1999). Specifically, after looking at the words and answering the filler questions, participants were asked to indicate on a scale 1–7 the extent they: 1) “are interested in new foods with status”, 2) “would buy a food product just because it has status”, and 3) “would pay more for a food product if it had status”. As expected, the statements (one composite measure was formed, $\alpha = 0.747$) received higher scores (M_s 3.56, $SD = 0.783$ vs. 2.73, $SD = 0.768$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 1.1$) among participants who memorized the list of status words ($n = 15$) – participants’ sex did not interact with motive primes ($p > 0.3$) meaning that the word lists had similar effect to men and women. Hence, our status prime (compared to control prime) seems to be capable of activating consumers’ desire for status.

3.2. Results and discussion

The key prediction in the experiment was that activating status motives should increase the likelihood of choosing the organic product (relative to the same organic product in the control condition). Indeed, as predicted, whereas 50% of the chosen products were organic in the control condition, the corresponding share was 70% in the status condition. As interaction was not detected, $p > 0.2$, the two target measures were summed to yield a choice index (range: 0–2 – cf. Wheeler & Berger, 2007). A one-

way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that this difference is significant $F(1,78) = 5.725$, $p = 0.019$, $d = .53$.² Thus, eliciting status motives may be an effective strategy for promoting sustainable consumption behavior also in the everyday food choice context.

However, when signaling about status, it is not meaningless whether the signaling occurs – be it through seemingly prosocial acts or material possessions – in a private or public setting; in a situation visible to others, the reputational aspects are much more salient (see Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). Thus, we investigate next how the social visibility of the choice affects organic food preferences.

4. Experiment 2

4.1. Materials and method

The first study showed that activating status motives increased the tendency to choose a prosocial organic product over a nonorganic product. The second study examined how status motives influenced preferences for organic versus nonorganic products when people considered shopping in a public setting (at a grocery store with a friend). As people appear to be sensitive to the social visibility of prosocial acts, we predicted that when people considered shopping in public (unlike in experiment 1), status motives should further increase preferences for organic foods over nonorganic foods.

4.1.1. Participants, design and procedure

Eighty-eight student consumers ($M_{age} = 28.3$ years, $SD = 4.92$, 50% of men, the most common (57%) household yearly income level 0–19999€) were approached with a questionnaire in a university library in a large Finnish city (approx. two months after the first experiment with a different set of participants). The study design was identical to that of experiment 1 (status condition $n = 44$, control condition $n = 44$). However, this time the choice situation was described to be visible to others. Whereas in experiment 1, the participants were just asked to choose between the alternatives (i.e., private setting), now they were first instructed to imagine that they are in a store shopping for ingredients for a special dinner with a friend. The post-study interviews did not reveal any suspiciousness this time either. No personal information was collected and afterwards the participants were debriefed.

² In terms of the more luxurious vs. conventional product pair (one choice index was formed, $p > 0.4$), no differences in choices were detected $F(1,78) = 0.000$, $p = 1$, $d = 0.0$. Thus, status motives did not lead to favor more indulgent food options. This result brings support for ruling out the possibility that organic options are preferred more (after status activation) as they are just “unconventional”. It must be highlighted that none of the demographic (sex, age), socio-economic (income level) or situational (activity level, mood) factors asked or the participants’ product type or brand attitudes had any effect on DVs (all p -values > 0.2).

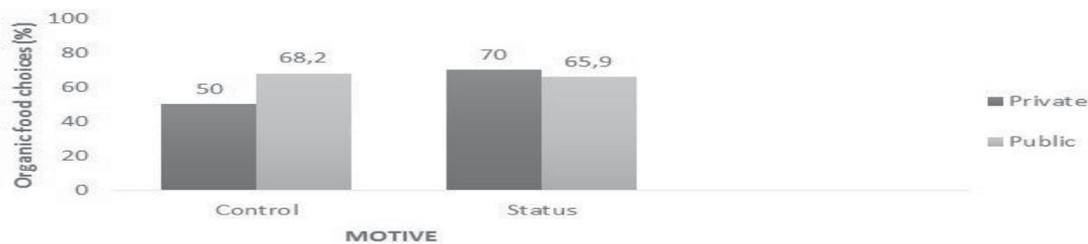


Fig. 2. Preference for organic foods as a function of primed motive and social visibility of choice.

4.2. Results and discussion

We first pooled the data sets from experiments 1 and 2 together (recall that the measured variables were exactly the same). Then, to examine if status motives had a different effect on preferences depending on whether study participants were choosing in public or private, a two-way ANOVA with motive (status vs. control) and audience (private vs. public) was performed. As the effects of motive and audience did not vary between the products, $p > 0.3$, the two target measures were again summed to yield a choice index (range: 0–2). This analysis revealed an indication of interaction $F(1,164) = 3.503$, $p = 0.063$, $\eta^2 = .021$.³ Specific simple effects were examined next.

As can be seen from Fig. 2, the results are – at first glance – somewhat unexpected (only average percentages are reported). Contrary to the prediction, activating status motives did not further increase preference for organic foods when choosing in public: public status vs. public control $F(1,164) = 0.077$, $p = 0.782$, $d = 0.05$; public status vs. private status $F(1,164) = 0.236$, $p = 0.628$, $d = 0.1$. On the other hand, analyses revealed an interesting detail, namely, the social visibility of the choice in itself (i.e., public control vs. private control) significantly increased preference for organic foods $F(1,164) = 4.668$, $p = 0.033$, $d = 0.47$. Thus, in the organic food context, the social visibility of the choice seems to act in the same way as priming status motives does. This claim is supported by the fact that in both of the public conditions (status and control) and in the private status condition (i.e., in conditions with reputational concerns), organic foods are equally preferred and this preference was distinctly stronger than in the private control condition (i.e., the only condition devoid of any manipulations).

To conclude, also in this everyday food choice context consumers seem to go green to be seen. The results are in line with the costly signaling theory: the participants preferred prosocial organic foods only when their status motives were activated (experiment 1) or when their choices were salient to others (experiment 2) and thus influenced one's reputation.

Hence, we go next beyond product choices and investigate whether the prosocial status-signaling effect also manifests itself in the senso-emotional experience of organic foods. This idea is not conflict with the key tenets of the costly signaling view. Just like preferring a product in a choice, preferring a product in a taste test – especially in a situation visible to others – offers an opportunity to (nonconscious) status signaling.

³ A corresponding two-way ANOVA was performed in relation to more luxurious vs. conventional product choices (again, a choice index was formed, $p > 0.5$); this analysis did not reveal an interaction $F(1,164) = 0.012$, $p = 0.912$, $\eta^2 = 0.0$. None of the asked control variables (see footnote 2) had any effect on DVs this time either (all p -values > 0.2).

5. Experiment 3

5.1. Materials and method

Experiment 1 showed that activating status motives increased the tendency to choose an organic over a nonorganic food product. Experiment 2 uncovered that making the choice situation visible to others created the same effect. Experiment 3 sought an answer to the question: does the “going green to be seen” effect also manifest itself in the senso-emotional experience of organic food? In line with two previous predictions, we expected that activating consumers' status motives will improve the senso-emotional experience of organic food and that making the reputational aspects salient will further boost it.

5.1.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and fifty-seven student consumers were recruited for the study in the university campus area of a large Finnish city ($M_{age} = 25.0$ years, $SD = 3.52$, 45% of men, the most common (58%) household yearly income level 0–19999€). Individuals moving around the campus buildings were approached and asked to participate in a memory recall study which also involves tasting a food samples. As a cover story, we told our study participants that we are interested in how cognitively taxing efforts influence the ability to remember things. To amplify the cover story, we led them to believe that in their group the cognitively taxing efforts related to taking a stand on various statements about their consumption habits, while in the other groups they related to mathematical reasoning and word puzzle-solving.

The consenting individuals were then escorted to a peaceful classroom furnished with a few three-walled cubicles to ensure distraction-free circumstances for tasting the food samples and completing the questionnaire (approx. 20–25 min). Social visibility was manipulated by leading the study participants at the public condition ($n = 137$) to believe that they were supposed to share their food responses with the researchers at the end of the experiment (this instruction was given both orally and via text in the questionnaire). At the private condition ($n = 120$), no such instructions were voiced. According to the post-study interviews, participants did not see the connection between the memorization task and taste test. They received a canteen voucher worth six euros for their time and effort. No personal information was collected and afterwards the participants were thanked and debriefed.

5.1.2. Design and measurement of senso-emotional experience of food

The study had a 2 (audience: public vs. private) \times 2 (motive: status vs. control) \times 2 (informed production method: organic vs. conventional) between-subjects design. Study participants were randomly assigned to each of the experimental conditions. Status

motives were primed in the same way as in experiments 1 and 2. Likewise, the questionnaire remained essentially unchanged; only the section concerning the measurement of DV was revised. The senso-emotional experience of food was gauged, first by the conventional hedonic liking item (taste un/pleasantness, scale 1–7) and second by measuring the emotions the taste elicited (cf. Spinelli, Masi, Dinnella, Zoboli, & Monteleone, 2014). These included both positive-negative and private-collective emotions (scale 1–7): *joy*, *hopefulness*, *irritation* and *disappointment* (cf. Luomala, Sirieix, & Tahir, 2009; Onwezen, 2015). Finally, participants were requested to indicate the intensity of their purchase intention toward the foods they tasted (scale 1–7).

5.1.3. Food samples

Each study participant's senso-emotional experience was recorded for two food product samples: carrot (in grated form) and cheese (as chunks). The samples were prepared following the same procedures on the day before the experiment and stored in the refrigerator (5 °C) in sealable containers. Before the actual taste tests, the samples were kept at room temperature for one to two hours. Carrot was selected as the focal food sample as it is a simple agricultural product devoid of complex extra symbolism. One group of participants was informed (in the questionnaire) that they would taste grated carrots that were conventionally produced and another that they were grown organically.

In turn, cheese was chosen as the second taste sample because it represents a more refined product category with a wider range of market offerings and is thus imbued with symbolic meanings (cf. Vieitez, Gámbaro, Callejas, Miraballes, & Irigaray, 2014). This time, one group of participants were led to believe that they would taste "ordinary" cheese, while another group was told that the cheese was "luxurious" (cf. Jacquot, Berthaud, Sghair, Diep, & Brand, 2013). In effect, the inclusion of cheese measurements served to 1) investigate whether status activation improves the senso-emotional experience of a "luxurious food" (cf. cold cuts and blue cheeses in experiment 1) and 2) mask the fact that the study is interested in the effect of the "organic" cue. In reality, the food samples were always prepared using the same food product material.

5.2. Results and discussion

To examine if the status motive activation and visibility of the food responses had a different effect on the senso-emotional experience of a food sample that the participants were told was conventionally vs. organically produced (DVs: taste, joy, hopefulness, disappointment, irritability and purchase intention), a three-way ANOVA with the motive (status vs. control), informed production method (organic vs. conventional) and audience (private vs. public) as IVs was performed. This analysis revealed an indication of interaction in relation to *taste* $F(1,249) = 3.542$, $p = 0.061$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$, *joy* $F(1,249) = 3.594$, $p = 0.059$, $\eta^2 = 0.014$, *hopefulness* $F(1,249) = 10.943$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.042$ and *purchase intention* $F(1,249) = 2.689$, $p = 0.102$, $\eta^2 = 0.011$ but not in relation to *disappointment* $F(1,249) = 0.004$, $p = 0.951$, $\eta^2 = 0.0$ and *irritability* $F(1,249) = 0.337$, $p = 0.562$, $\eta^2 = .001$.⁴ Specific simple effects were examined next.

As can be seen from Fig. 3, activating status motives (vs. control motives) did not improve the senso-emotional experience of a food

sample believed to be organic in the private condition. Yet, the food sample served as organic received slightly higher *taste* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 5.7$, $SD = 0.915$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 5.51$, $SD = 0.820$; $F(1,249) = 0.647$, $p = 0.422$, $d = 0.22$), *joy* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 4.33$, $SD = 1.348$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 4.3$, $SD = 1.368$; $F(1,249) = 0.008$, $p = 0.929$, $d = 0.02$), *hopefulness* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 4.23$, $SD = 1.371$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 4.1$, $SD = 1.768$; $F(1,249) = 0.115$, $p = 0.734$, $d = 0.08$) and *purchase intention* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.520$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 3.97$, $SD = 1.351$; $F(1,249) = 1.092$, $p = 0.297$, $d = 0.28$) ratings.

Regarding our follow-up prediction (i.e., that making the tasting situation visible to others should improve the senso-emotional experience), the analyses revealed that this was indeed the case (see Fig. 3). When status motives were activated (vs. control motives) in the public condition, the food sample served as organic not only *tasted* (marginal effect) more pleasant ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 5.51$, $SD = 0.742$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 5.09$, $SD = 1.138$; $F(1,249) = 3.376$, $p = 0.067$, $d = 0.44$), but also created more intense emotions of *joy* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 4.34$, $SD = 1.571$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 3.53$, $SD = 1.522$; $F(1,249) = 5.432$, $p = 0.021$, $d = 0.52$) and *hopefulness* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 3.66$, $SD = 1.878$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 2.38$, $SD = 1.415$; $F(1,249) = 12.138$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 0.77$) and even stronger *purchase intention* ($M_{\text{status prime}} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.626$; $M_{\text{control prime}} = 3.18$, $SD = 1.732$; $F(1,249) = 6.084$, $p = 0.014$, $d = 0.52$). Thus, it seems that the "going green to be seen" effect is not limited to product choices, but extends to the more physiologically-driven senso-emotional experience of food.⁵ In other words, the effects of motivational priming can go beyond the well-established evaluative and behavioral domains. As for the other simple effects, no significant differences were found.

In summary, three novel insights emerge from this research. First, activating consumers' status motives increases the likelihood of prosocial status signaling through organic food choices. Second, making the reputational aspects of choice salient (i.e., visible to others) also heightens its probability. Third, activating consumers' status motives and simultaneously making the reputational aspects of tasting salient (i.e., visible to others) creates an improved senso-emotional experience of organic foods.

6. Conclusion and implications

From the outset, one might think that everyday food choices and sending reputational messages are poorly compatible with each another. By applying insights from the costly signaling theory, we have proven otherwise in this paper (through three experiments). When consumers' status motives were activated, they made significantly more prosocial organic food choices in this smaller price tag context (experiment 1); it was not even necessary to activate status motives, as just making the reputational aspects salient sufficed to create the same effect (experiment 2). These findings strongly indicate that food consumers go green for reputational reasons. However, this was not the whole story. We demonstrated that in addition to product choices, the "going green to be seen" effect can manifest itself in the senso-emotional experience of organic food (experiment 3). Next, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings together with study limitations and future research suggestions are discussed in more detail.

⁴ A corresponding three-way ANOVA was performed in relation to cheese sample experiences (motive, cheese information and audience); this analysis did not reveal indications of interaction in terms of any DV (p-values ranging from 0.411 to 0.821). Hence, specific simple effects were not examined.

⁵ As in the case of previous experiments, none of the asked demographic, socio-economic or situational factors (see footnote 2) nor product type attitudes had any effect on DVs (all p-values >0.2).



Fig. 3. Senso-emotional experience of food samples believed to be organic in different experimental conditions.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The fact that prosocial status signaling, the “going green to be seen” effect, can manifest itself at the level of senso-emotional food responses represents novel understanding – when reputation was at stake, even the taste experience became more pleasant. Why did signaling make study participants happy and hopeful? One might think that the “better taste” of organically produced food made them feel happy. Another, quite intuitive explanation might be that favoring a prosocial alternative puts one in a good mood because one is behaving in a way that is beneficial for other people, society and even the planet. However, differences emerged when tasting the same product, which was always presumably organically produced. Activating the status motives can explain these findings to a certain extent. However, participants experienced positive emotions only in the public condition. We suggest that happiness is experienced (nonconsciously) when one has the opportunity to attain status and to climb up in the peer group hierarchy – higher pleasantness ratings open up the possibility to signal about one’s prosocial tendencies.

Another relevant question is: why did social visibility have a slightly different effect in the product choice and tasting experiments? This might be due to the fact that the manipulation method was not the same. Whereas the witness of the signaling was a fictional friend (familiar) in experiment 2, this was an actual person (a previously unfamiliar researcher) in experiment 3. Studies conducted in the social facilitation domain often suggests that the impact of audience on actors’ behavior can be expected to be stronger – due to a sense of uncertainty – if the actor is unfamiliar with the audience (see Guerin, 2010). Furthermore, it is known that the witness’s status can moderate the audience effect; people tend to become more cautious in front of an audience with a higher status (cf. Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015). Accordingly, we can speculate that perhaps social pressure created by the presence of a presumably smart academician – above the student in the hierarchy – is more intense than the corresponding pressure created by a friend. This claim receives support from the fact that in the public condition (experiment 3) the ratings are generally lower than in the private condition.

Conceptually the intensity could mean – as the participants knew they are being judged – that evaluation apprehension (see Baumeister, Ainsworth, & Vohs, 2016; Feinberg & Aiello, 2006) has been present in experiment 3. In practice, when the signaling had a witness (researcher), but when the desire for status had not been activated (control prime), participants became cautious in their judgments (due to the potential for immediate reputation harms).

When the desire for status was activated in the presence of a witness, this concern vanished (as a result of nonconscious status activation, the motivational focus possibly shifted from avoiding reputation harms to attaining potential reputation benefits). This mediating mechanism of social facilitation (see Uziel, 2007) could explain the substantial differences in evaluations between the motive primes in the public setting (see Fig. 3). In any case, the results speak the high importance of controlling the meanings attached to the method when manipulating social visibility. Yet, prosocial status signaling occurring through favoring organic foods – possibly because of the expected reputation benefits – seems to have the power to make consumers happy.

Consumer research has recently produced startling findings concerning the effects of motivational priming on consumers’ behavior and choices (e.g., Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014; Madzharov, Block, & Morrin, 2015; Nenkov & Scott, 2014; Park & John, 2014). In the food realm, exposing study participants to a power prime leads them to signal their status through choice of food portion size (Dubois et al., 2012). In a similar way, a promotion prime led to an increase in food portion size behavior, whereas a prevention prime caused a decrease in the same behavior (Webster, Chakrabarty, & Kinard, 2016). In the case of healthiness, a gratefulness prime (vs. pride) created more unhealthy choices (Schlosser, 2015), while putting health-related cues (vs. pleasure-related ones) at vending machines promoted healthier choices (Stöckli et al., 2016). Some consumers may even become promotion-oriented when their motivations are primed by a hedonically tempting food and this type of priming then guides their subsequent hedonic food consumption (Sengupta & Zhou, 2007). However, no evidence can be found of any effects of motivational priming on consumers’ senso-emotional food experience. Hence, our findings from consumers’ nonconscious food responses – that go beyond the well-established evaluative and behavioral domains – provide an extension to the literature of motivational priming.

Although some indications of the reputational value of organic foods have been found (Carfagna et al., 2014; Cervellon & Shammass, 2013; Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix, 2014; Kniazeva & Venkatesh, 2007), the findings have been more or less ambiguous; these mundanely consumed products are said to be shopped for as effortlessly as their conventionally produced alternatives (Thøgersen et al., 2012). Furthermore, many consumers do not appreciate organic production methods (Bellows, Alcaraz, & Hallman, 2010). According to our findings, favoring organic foods indeed possesses status-enhancing potential. In other words, they can be used as one’s status-signaling efforts. This raises the question of how big actually is the consumer segment that favors organic foods for other motives – such as

reputation management – than the often self-reported and socially approved reasons of healthiness, tastiness and ethical concerns. Future studies are encouraged to take both socially approved and disapproved motives into account at the same time when studying organic food consumption.

Our findings bring support for the idea that favoring organic foods can act as a costly signal of status. Lee et al. (2015) and Nelissen and Meijers (2011) have shown that favoring luxury products can act as such a signal; in the latter study, wearing a high-status brand-name shirt (vs. an unbranded shirt) even created several real-life behavior benefits for this person. Griskevicius et al. (2010) suggested that favoring green consumer durables can act as a costly signal of status. In this paper we have shown, contrary to previous studies, that a behavior strategy as mundane as food consumption can act as a costly signal of status. A lone example suggesting the same is the study of Puska et al. (2016), in which a male who seemed to favor organic foods was not only perceived more positively, but was also favorably treated. In the study of Puska et al. (2016), as in the one of Griskevicius et al. (2010), however, the prosocial signaling effects were investigated in relation to simple behavior intentions and perceptual experiences (cf. more physiologically-driven food responses in the present study).

Finally, it is known that a considerable part of consumers' behavior is nonconscious (see Lee et al., 2013). Some evolutionary-minded researchers have suggested (e.g., Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013; Saad, 2016) that all our behaviors are guided by nonconscious, fundamental motives (e.g., desire for status). In the food realm, acknowledging the importance of nonconscious forces is especially relevant since it has been estimated that the majority of food-related decisions occur at a nonconscious, automatic level (Cohen & Babey, 2012). According to Köster (2009), intuitive reasoning and nonconscious decision making play a more important role in food-related behavior than in probably any other area of consumption. Also in the present study, the “going green to be seen” effect occurred as a result of subtle nonconscious priming. The message of this discussion is that food-related consumer research should primarily utilize methods – in addition to *priming* – that are capable of tapping into consumers' nonconscious processes and responses (e.g., *nudging* – see Wilson, Buckley, Buckley, & Bogomolova, 2016).

6.2. Study limitations and future research suggestions

As always, some study limitations can be identified. At the same time, they offer fruitful opportunities for further research.

This study concentrated on how prosocial organic foods are preferred and how they are experienced in terms of sensoremo-tional properties after (status) motivational priming efforts. Due to the long procedure, only one prosocial food sample was included in the study: a simple agricultural product, carrot in grated form. Thus, it is not possible to take a stand on whether consumers' food responses would have been the same if the served sample had been more processed (e.g., organic dairy product), classifiable as a vice food (see Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011) or inherently rich in terms of food symbolism (e.g., organic meat and masculinity – see Schösler, de Boer, Boersema, & Aiking, 2015 – or organic chocolate and *emotionality* – see Thomson et al., 2010). In other words, the generalizability of the findings beyond the organic vegetable context is left for future research to (dis)confirm.

Experiments 1 and 2 did not involve actual purchases, but hypothetical product choices (i.e., behavioral intentions). Thus, these findings must be validated with different methods (preferably involving actual purchases), in a more natural setting (preferably in a real retail environment) and in other product categories than bacon and coffee, so that a more accurate picture can be formed of

to what extent food consumers go green to be seen. Also products with some other prosocial claims, such as local (Denver & Jensen, 2014; Memery, Angell, Megicks, & Lindgreen, 2015) or fair trade (Kimura et al., 2012) foods, must be investigated.

In experiment 3, after the motivational priming efforts, the (assumed) organic food sample was experienced rather similarly regardless of the dimension in question (taste, emotions of joy and hopefulness and purchase intention). This raises the question of whether some kind of “halo effect” that we are not aware of is influencing food responses (cf. Chernev & Blair, 2015). In this case, exposure to status competition triggers a need to stand out in consumers, which in turn is realized in the form of higher general ratings toward the organic food sample. So that a more precise answer to this question can be given also other (more objective) methods should be applied.

Neuroscience provides a potential method to exclude possible “halo effects” and generally to examine food-related nonconscious behavior. The neuromarketing approach (e.g., Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012) can provide – by avoiding the bias always present in self-reported evaluations – an additional or completely alternative way to do consumer research; in some cases (more subjective) conventional consumer research and (objective) neuromarketing data can even disagree (see Hammou, Galib, & Melloul, 2013).

As for the theoretical underpinnings of the present study, it must be noted that the foundations of the costly signaling view partly originate from the evolutionary theory of sexual selection. Even though it has been successfully applied in business research, it may be imperfect for understanding how ethical consumption behaviors such as favoring organic food serve reputation management and coalition formation within social networks devoid of mating concerns. The notions of reciprocal altruism (Kurzban, Burton-Chellew, & West, 2015) and indirect reciprocity (Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016) provide alternative promising conceptualizations for tackling these phenomena.

The fact cannot be ignored that the experiments were conducted in a nationally large city and in a university campus area. That is to say, the study participants were highly educated (or enrolled in university) and the vast majority of them were from urban areas. The study of Puska et al. (2016) revealed that even within the same, highly developed and homogenous Western country, there may be great variations in terms of how prosocial status signaling or organic foods are viewed. Thus, before generalizing the findings, the experiments should be replicated in a socio-culturally distinct area (e.g., rural areas) and among other participants than university graduates (e.g., blue-collar workers).

The fact that no direct information was collected on participants' associations regarding organic food or their own purchase frequencies can be viewed as a limitation of the present study. Another limitation is that, unlike in the case of organic food, we did not pretest to what extent the more indulgent food products (cold cuts and blue cheese in experiment 1 & 2) or cheese sample served as “luxurious” (in experiment 3) were actually perceived to represent more indulgent or luxurious food options. On the other hand, effects relating to these foods were not the primary interest of the research.

Possible moderators of the “going green to be seen” effect cannot be ignored. In terms of traditional demographic (sex, age) or socio-economic factors (income level), no moderation was detected, but are there others? One potential moderator is consumers' personal values (see Caracciolo et al., 2016). Driving a Prius, for example, confers greater benefit in communities with strong environmental values than in other communities (Sexton & Sexton, 2014). Thus, an interesting question is whether consumers who lean toward self-enhancement values (power, achievement) are

more inclined to prefer organic foods when exposed to status competition than those who lean toward conservation (security, conformity, tradition) or self-transcendence (benevolence, universalism) values. In addition to personal values, other psychological characteristics should not be overlooked. Narcissism, for instance, can qualify as a possible moderator. According to [Naderi and Strutton \(2015\)](#), narcissists are inclined to buy more expensive green products due to the prestigious and luxurious image they confer to others.

6.3. Practical implications

After the motivational priming efforts, the participants not only had a greater preference for organic food products (experiments 1 & 2), but also a stronger intention to purchase them (experiment 3). To illustrate the managerial potential of this finding, it is well known that, due to their high price, consumers do not purchase organic foods more often even though the self-reported attitudes toward them are usually rather positive (see [Marian et al., 2014](#)). Thus, in spite of the high price, making the reputational aspects more salient in their sales environments (e.g., clues capable of activating consumers' status motives and more visible selling locations) might be an effective way to boost their sale (cf. [Rana & Paul, 2017](#)). More generally, eliciting reputational concerns may be an effective strategy for promoting sustainable consumption behavior (cf. [Noppers, Keizer, Bolderdijk, & Steg, 2014](#)).

The previous research has shown that arousal of (especially) positive emotions is a significant determinant of prosocial (including proenvironmental) behaviors (e.g., [Bissing-Olson, Iyer, Fielding, & Zacher, 2013](#); [Russell & Friedrich, 2015](#)). In the present study, after tasting the assumed organic food sample, status-primed participants experienced more intense (positive) emotions of joy and hopefulness, while tasting had no effect on (negative) emotions of irritation and disappointment. Thus, eliciting positive emotions may have some efficacy when encouraging consumers to make more organic food choices. Creative marketers can implement this in practice by creating package solutions for organic food products capable of activating especially positive emotions – utilization of emojis and emoticons might be one way (see [Vidal, Ares, & Jaeger, 2016](#)).

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Male–Male Status Signaling through Favoring Organic Foods: Is the Signaler Perceived and Treated as a Friend or a Foe?

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ABSTRACT

Even though consumers' status signaling is a heavily researched topic, empirical contributions from two important research areas—the mundane food context and prosocial status signaling between male consumers—to signaling literature are still scarce. Thus, this study empirically investigates how a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is perceived and treated by other males in two different sociocultural settings (urban vs. rural). In an urban area—but not in a rural—the pro-organic signaler was perceived as more respected, altruistic, and affluent than a male who did not signal about this (he also received statistically more money in a charity donation task). This may indicate that signaling about this tendency—because it can be viewed as use of one's own resources for the benefit of others—is not only a way to attain status, but can also make others behave more positively toward the signaler. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

The symbolic communication function of consumption choices has been known for over a hundred years (Veblen, 1899). It is now widely accepted that people use (either consciously or nonconsciously) products and brands to signal about their status (Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Holt, 1998; Solomon, 1983), and inversely, that people make inferences about others based on their possessions (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Burroughs, Drews, & Hallman, 1991; Richins, 1994a, 1994b). The vast majority of current signaling research suggests—acknowledging also the moderating role of certain consumer-specific and contextual factors—that people signal about their status through luxury brands or visible consumer durables and that materialistic values motivate status signaling (Charles, Hurst, & Roussanov, 2009; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006; Wang & Wallendorf, 2006). More recently, however, the understanding of status-signaling consumption has expanded in important ways. It has been shown, for instance, that

in some societies and social situations signaling occurs through so-called quiet brands instead of loud ones (Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010). Also, prosocial behaviors such as green consumer choices (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010) and donating to charity (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009) can serve as means of status signaling. It has even been shown that status signalers may actually be more favorably treated in social interactions (Lee, Ko, & Megehee, 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

Even though prior studies have yielded an intriguing understanding of the main vehicles and arenas of status signaling, two important research areas have been largely neglected: more mundane consumption contexts such as food and prosocial status signaling between male consumers. It has been traditionally assumed that food consumption has little to do with such symbolism; mundanely consumed foods have often been seen as encompassing low-involvement choices (Hoyer, 1984; Russo, Staelin, Nolan, Russell, & Metcalfe, 1986). More

contemporary studies, however, prove otherwise. Not only can a food choice be considered as an expression of a consumer's identity and values (Senauer, 2001) or a lifestyle (Brunsø, Scholderer, & Grunert, 2004), but status also can be signaled through the selection of food product size (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012). Considering this, and the fact that in some Western consumer markets organic foods can actually be perceived as luxury (Cervellon & Shammas, 2013: "sustainable luxury"), the question arises whether signaling can occur—in the present era of sustainability—in the organic food context too (Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix, 2014; Elliot, 2013). The recent surge of interest in social and reputational food choice motives (Kimura et al., 2012; Renner, Sproesser, Strohbach, & Schupp, 2012) supports this notion.

The scant attention given to male-to-male status signaling—or to gender specificity in status signaling in general—by consumer researchers is delimiting, since it is well documented that, as part of intersexual selection, males send status signals to attract the opposite sex (Buss & Barnes, 1986). Moreover, males also send status signals to impress other males; as part of intrasexual competition (Buss, 1988) they try not only to beat each other, but also to create strategic coalitions to gain access to resources relevant for survival and reproduction. To illustrate, men are not only more likely to engage in intergroup rivalry for prestige gains (Van Vugt, de Cremer, & Janssen, 2007), but they can also show an in-group bias in cooperation, even when reciprocity from the in-group member is not expected (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008). Even though there are reasons to believe that the propensity for status signaling is pronouncedly a male-driven phenomenon (Sundie et al., 2011; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013; Yuki & Yokota, 2009), the current consumer research has treated it as a more or less nongendered phenomenon. Thus, investigating how male status signalers are perceived and treated by other male signal receivers in the context of organic foods provides an intriguing starting point for research.

Another compelling reason for focusing on this research context is that nowadays food consumption can be as involving for men as for women; men have generally increased their commitment in food-related activities during the last 10–20 years (Kroshus, 2008) and appreciate cooking and organic foods just as women do (Bellows, Alcaraz, & Hallman, 2010). In fact, different food-related practices have become a legitimate and important way to male consumers to express their masculine identity and status (Klasson & Ulver, 2015).

Even though consumers' tendency to signal about their status has been extensively researched, only a scant amount of research has been conducted from the perspective of signal receivers. Considering the findings of these few studies (Fennis, 2008; Lee et al., 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Saad & Vongas, 2009), this is surprising. In the experimental study of Nelissen and Meijers (2011), a person who preferred luxury brands was more favorably treated than an identical

nonfavorer in many arenas of real-life social interaction; wearing a high-status brand-name shirt (vs. an unbranded shirt) increased others' compliance with this person's requests—he or she even received more donations when collecting for charity and had a higher likelihood of being hired for a job or getting a pay rise. Regardless of whether the status signaling occurs through favoring luxury brands or prosocial behaviors, the way the signal is construed is most likely dependent on the sociocultural context in which it is sent (Inglehart, 1997). Owning a TV set, for example, is a more prominent sign of success in rural than in urban China (Piron, 2006). In a similar vein, in urban and highly developed Western societies, sustainable consumption choices are probably viewed as prosocial, but, for instance, in less-developed or rural societies even unsustainable choices can qualify as prosocial (Griskevicius et al., 2010).

In summary, then, this study seeks to contribute to consumer research addressing status signaling in four ways. First, it offers unprecedented evidence for male-to-male status signaling by demonstrating how men both send and interpret prosocial signals. Second, it goes beyond the typical perceptual signaling effects (Belk et al., 1982; Holt, 1998) to show how consumers sending altruistic status signals can actually be more or less favorably treated in social situations by signal receivers. Third, it produces empirical proof for the idea that this effect is moderated by sociocultural factors such as urban vs. rural worldviews (Chao & Schor, 1998; Kooijmans & Flores-Palacios, 2014). Fourth, it challenges the predominant view that luxury brands and consumer durables serve as the main arena for status signaling; the study reveals that organic food consumption can also act as a stage for such signaling.

Next, the conceptual underpinnings of the paper are elucidated. Then, the methodology and the results of two field studies—tackling the issues discussed above—are presented. Theoretical and managerial implications conclude the paper.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNINGS

Signaling Status through Sustainable Consumption Choices

From the outset, the concepts of status signaling and sustainable consumer choices seem poorly compatible with each other. Recent research, however, has shown that there are important links between them. For instance, when the *New York Times* reported, based on a large study, the top five reasons for buying a hybrid Prius (an environmentally friendly but rather expensive and inefficient car), concern for the environment was last on the list. Instead, the Prius owners reported that the most important reason for buying one was because "it makes a statement about me"; in other words, it signals that the owner is not selfish, but a person who

cares for the environment and is willing to sacrifice for the greater good (Maynard, 2007). In a similar vein, the luxury car manufacturer Lexus's decision to price its hybrid model at more than USD 100,000 was seen as a bad move by many experts. However, the sales of the conspicuously pro-environmental and ultraexpensive Lexus LS600h exceeded projections by over 300% (Ramsey, 2007).

Griskevicius et al. (2010) have also found links between sustainable consumption choices and status signaling. Their experimental study revealed that after study participants were primed with status motives, they preferred less luxurious green products over more luxurious nongreen products across a wide range of product categories (cars, household cleaners, dishwashers, backpacks, batteries, and table lamps). Priming status motives increased the desire for green products especially when shopping in public (but not private) and when they were more (but not less) expensive than the nongreen products. Consumers' willingness to pay for a "green" signal and their status-motivated desire to display "austerity rather than ostentation" has been identified in other studies too (Elliot, 2013; Sexton & Sexton, 2014: "conspicuous conservation effect").

Thus, the links do exist, but why then do consumers want to communicate about their status by favoring sustainable products, brands, and services? It has been suggested (Maynard, 2007) that a person acting like this signals to others that he or she is a prosocial—rather than a proself—individual. Having a prosocial reputation (i.e., altruistic) can be extremely useful; it has been shown in several studies that people who are perceived as cooperative and helpful are considered to be more desirable friends, allies, leaders, and romantic partners (see Griskevicius et al., 2010, p. 393; Van Vugt & Iredale, 2013). Thus, signaling about one's prosocial behavior may also be a viable strategy for attaining status (i.e., it offers an opportunity to be respected and honored in the peer group that, in turn, improves one's chances of getting access to a leading position and the consequent resources).

In the light of the status-enhancing benefits of prosocial behaviors, one might think that people would actually compete to be seen as being as prosocial as possible. Indeed, this has occurred throughout different cultures and time periods (e.g., both South American hunter-gatherers and modern-day billionaires have been shown to compete for status by putting up an altruistic front): this behavior is known as competitive altruism (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Hawkes, 1993). From the rational economic (Dawes & Thaler, 1988) and gene selection (Dawkins, 1976) perspectives, however, the prevalence of competitive altruism is problematic because self-sacrifice, especially repeated self-sacrifice, is costly. That is, it depletes the giver's resources that are needed for survival, reproduction, or kin care (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996).

Consequently, the existence of competitive altruism in human life is often explained through the lens of costly signaling theory (Zahavi, 1975). This theory was

developed in the field of ethology (e.g., the case of Arabian babblers—Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997), but it has recently been successfully applied to understand human psychology as well. In the field of consumer research, it has been shown that signaling through green (Griskevicius et al., 2010) and luxury products (Lee et al., 2015; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) can act as costly signals of status. As already mentioned, in the latter study, favoring luxury brands (i.e., sending a costly signal) even yielded concrete social benefits such as greater compliance and bigger financial donations from the signal receivers. According to this perspective, an altruistic act (i.e., sustainable consumer choices) communicates about both a person's prosociality and his/her ability to incur greater costs without a negative impact on fitness (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). In other words, in human life, an altruistic act can also be a signal of wealth.

The basic claim of this paper is that favoring organic foods can act as a costly signal of status. On what grounds, then, can this tendency be qualified as a costly signal? According to Bliege Bird and Smith (2005) and Nelissen and Meijers (2011), four criteria must be met. First, the signal must be observable. Organic foods meet this criterion because they feature distinct visual labels and are often placed in separate locations in grocery stores. The second criterion relates to the fact that a genuine costly signal must be hard to fake (i.e., the signal must be costly to display for the signaler). The price premium that consumers pay for organic foods makes them prototypical examples of costly signals. In the United States, for example, it has been calculated that organic food is 40–175% more expensive than conventionally produced food (Magkos, Arvaniti, & Zampelas, 2006). It is important to stress that a costly signal does not have to be extremely expensive (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Hence, applying the costly signaling perspective in the context of consumption does not necessitate displays of (extravagant) luxury products, but also displays of more mundane goods, even food products, can meet this criterion (Dubois et al., 2012; Griskevicius et al., 2010). Furthermore, organic certification (needed for marketing foods as organic) is strictly regulated, making the production of counterfeit foods a risky and difficult undertaking: a hallmark of a true costly signal.

The third criterion of a costly signal is that it must be associated with some unobservable, yet desirable quality of an individual such as good genes, physical health, or the like. Many consumers actually believe that organic foods are healthier than conventionally produced foods (Shaw-Hughner, McDonagh, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007; Vega-Zamora, Torres-Ruiz, Murgado-Armenteros, & Parras-Rosa, 2014)—this may make them think that favorers of organic foods have better physical health than nonfavorers. This criterion implies that socially valued traits, by definition (Hyman, 1942), increase one's status. In this paper, it is assumed that the general status-enhancing traits that people associate with a person making sustainable consumer choices (favoring organic foods) are altruism

and wealth. This will be tested empirically. It is important to stress, however, that inferences about status, altruism, and wealth are not presumed to occur in a conscious fashion among human signal receivers any more than hens making conscious inferences about the genes of male Arabian babblers by viewing their self-sacrificing behavior in the treetops. In other words, the simple basic point here is that when explicitly informed, people (unlike hens) should express differences in the way they perceive others' status if the trait under investigation is in fact a costly signal (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011).

According to the final criterion, a costly signal must ultimately yield a fitness benefit to its signaler. This benefit derives from the effects of signaling about one's habit of favoring organic foods on the behavior of signal receivers. In this paper, "the behavior of the signal receivers toward the signaler" is used as a proxy for testing this (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) because actual fitness benefits resulting from favoring organic foods are virtually impossible to demonstrate (i.e., whether signal receivers treat a signal sender—a favorer of organic foods—differently in comparison to a nonfavorer, irrespective of the other characteristics of that person). To conclude, favoring organic foods satisfies the criteria of a costly signal relatively well.

However, in order to get more concrete credibility for the basic claim of this paper (i.e., favoring organic foods can act as a costly signal of status), an additional pre-study was conducted among 80 university students under the pretext of a memory recall task. In this study, half of the students were primed with words related to high status (status motive condition) and other half with neutral words (control motive condition); after the priming they had to choose between real organic food products and their conventionally produced alternatives. Those primed with status motives preferred (statistically) more organic food products (70% vs. 30%), whereas among the control respondents, no such choice behavior occurred (50% vs. 50%). By indicating that organic foods can possess status value, this finding concretely supports the presented claim. As implied in the introduction, males in particular tend to send and read costly signals. This issue is tackled next.

Why Male-Male Signaling? The majority of evolutionary biology research applying the costly signaling theory focuses on sexual selection. Among mammals, males usually invest less in reproduction, and thus they need to actively signal about their quality as a mate to females (Trivers, 1972). However, intrasexual signals are also important and can be understood in terms of costly signaling theory (Hudders, De Backer, Fisher, & Vyncke, 2014). In addition to signaling about the sender's access to resources (i.e., wealth in the case of humans), such signals can convey a message about his or her tendency to behave altruistically; that is, to share resources with others and accept risks while helping nonkin individuals. In the light of evolutionary

theory, cooperation with a person associated with these desirable traits is worth pursuing.

On the other hand, consumption-related signals can also give hints about whether the signal sender and receiver belong to the same "tribe"; in other words, are they members of the same "in-group" (Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; Wright, Dinsmore, & Kellaris, 2013). This is crucial because it is well known that humans have a tendency to act more altruistically toward nonkin individuals if they feel that they belong to the same "in-group" (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The behavioral pattern of favoring nonkin in-group members is known as parochial altruism (Bernhard, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2006). Therefore, it is suggested here that this should be taken into account when seeking to understand consumption-related signaling, especially in the intrasexual context.

Furthermore, there are reasons to claim that this behavioral tendency to classify others to in- or out-group members is especially relevant among men. Men are not only more likely to engage in intergroup rivalry for prestige gains (Van Vugt et al., 2007), but often participate—while women often do not—in costly, altruistic acts toward in-group members (Bugental & Beaulieu, 2009) without any direct expectations of reciprocity (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008), even in such cases where the possibility of intergroup conflict is very small (Yuki & Yokota, 2009). Men also tend to inhumanize out-group members much more than women do (Van Vugt, 2009). Indeed, compared to women, men base their sense of self more on their group memberships (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999), and even trivial symbolic acts, such as the flip of a coin, can activate this tribal feeling (Brewer, 1979; Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

One explanation suggested for men's polarized attitude toward other men dates back to the violent and bloody history of the human species; throughout history, male coalitions have fought fiercely against rival male coalitions over resources relevant for survival and reproduction (for a more detailed description of the "male warrior hypothesis," see Van Vugt et al., 2007; Van Vugt, 2009). According to evolutionary-minded social scientists (Kurzban & Leary, 2001), evolution has created a complex coalitional psychology for men: a set of domain-specific cognitive systems that are designed to cope with intergroup competition. This has equipped men with the capacity to make quick "us" vs. "them" interpretations resulting in in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination.

At this point, it must be asked though, do males really have sufficient product knowledge of organic foods for inferring in-group membership? According to the study of Aertsens, Mondelaers, Verbeke, Buysse, and Van Huylenbroeck (2011), they indeed possess such knowledge: consumers' objective knowledge regarding organic vegetables, for example, can be high and gender does not influence the level of knowledge. Moreover, men sometimes are willing to pay even more for organic foods than women (Ureña, Bernabéu, & Olmeda, 2008).

In summary, considering the well-documented tendency of men to classify other men as in- or out-group members—which has been much less common among women throughout history—it is suggested here that it is the intramale context that offers an especially intriguing starting point for conducting research on how consumers signaling about their status through favoring organic foods are perceived and treated by consumers receiving this signal.

STUDY 1: TESTING IN AN URBAN SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

To investigate how males signaling about their status through favoring organic foods are perceived and treated by other males receiving this signal—compared to males who do not signal about this—a field experiment was conducted. The details of this study are described below.

Methodology

Participants and Design. A total of 84 male shoppers (mean age = 36.8 years, 42.9% with a high education level, 46.4% single, median yearly income €40,000–€69,999; a total of eight categories ranging from <€15,000 to >€140,000) were approached in a mall in a European capital on two consecutive weekdays. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and asked to form an impression of: (1) a male person wearing an organic-labeled white T-shirt ($n = 42$), or (2) a male person wearing a blank white T-shirt ($n = 42$).

Procedure and Materials. Those approached were asked to participate in a study on “impression formation concerning food consumers¹.” They filled in the questionnaire on a plastic clipboard at their own pace (approx. 3–6 minutes). The questionnaire consisted of four pages. The first page collected background information (age, level of education, yearly income, place of residence, and marital status). The second page showed a page-sized picture of the same male person making a green salad in ordinary kitchen surroundings (Appendix), wearing either an organic-labeled or a nonlabeled white T-shirt (the label was digitally removed from the T-shirt). The organic label visible on the T-shirts (a ladybug with text: *organic*) was an official and nationally well-known green food product logo. The text instructed the participants to look at the picture carefully.

On the third page, the participants were asked to rate this person on a 7-point Likert scale

¹ The two questionnaire versions were randomized between the data collectors. In other words, when approaching a respondent, the collector did not know which version will be received by the respondent.

(1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) in terms of *status* (items: “this person is respected,” “this person is honored,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.749$), *wealth* (items: “this person is rich,” “this person has a lot of money,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.848$), *attractiveness* (items: “this person is attractive,” “this person is good looking,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.891$), *kindness* (items: “this person is kind,” “this person is friendly,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.686$), *trustworthiness* (items: “this person is trustworthy,” “this person is honest,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.727$), and *altruism* (items: “this person is unselfish,” “this person is generous,” “this person is helpful,” Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.688$). Hence, it was also investigated whether a male’s tendency to favor organic foods is associated with other desirable traits besides status, wealth, and altruism (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). At the end of the page, the participants were asked how much money they would give to this male person if he were collecting donations for the disaster relief work of the local Red Cross. This question served to measure how (un)favorably a male person signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is treated. On the fourth page, the extent to which the study participants perceived organic food to be cheaper or more expensive than conventionally produced food (5-point Likert scale: 1 = much cheaper, 5 = much more expensive) across six product categories was assessed.

Manipulation Pretest. To ensure that the organic logo used is noticed and its meaning understood as intended, a separate pretest was conducted in the settings of the present studies. More specifically, a total of 60 males were approached both in the urban ($n = 30$) and in the rural ($n = 30$) areas. After a background information check, they were instructed to look at the picture carefully (version with the logo) and to answer the following questions (while answering they did not see the picture anymore). After asking certain control questions relating to the person in the picture (e.g., color of his hair and T-shirt, chopped vegetable) the respondents were asked to indicate if they noticed a logo in it (logo options: *fair trade*, *local food*, *Adidas*, *Tommy Hilfiger*, *a domestic dairy brand*, and *the ladybug*), and if they did, what kind of products they think it represents (again six options: *locally produced foods*, *fair trade products*, *organically produced foods*, *domestic dairy products*, *sport products*, and *luxury products*).

The results were unequivocal. In the urban setting 28 of 30 and in the rural setting 29 of 30 remembered seeing the ladybug logo and, more importantly, all of them understood it refers to organically produced foods. Note that the actual studies are not memory recall tasks: when a respondent is rating the male person in the picture, it is permitted for him to turn the page back to look at the picture again. To conclude, the manipulation instrument used (the ladybug logo with text *organic* in white T-shirt) elicited the expected outcome in both the study settings: the logo was noticed and its meaning understood correctly by the respondents.

Table 1. Mean Ratings (\pm SD) of the Studied Six Traits in the Label vs. No Label Conditions.

Perception	Organic Label Condition ($n = 42$)		Nonlabel Condition ($n = 42$)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Status	4.65***	0.75	4.01	1.30
Wealth	4.39*	1.02	3.89	1.29
Attractiveness	3.61**	1.10	2.95	1.26
Kindness	5.37*	0.90	4.95	1.06
Trustworthiness	4.95	0.88	4.58	1.17
Altruism	4.47**	0.76	4.00	0.86

Notes: Scale 1–7: 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports the means and SDs for the six traits studied. As can be seen, the male person signaling about his status through favoring organic foods received higher *status* ratings ($F(1, 82) = 7.736$, $p = 0.007$) and was perceived as more *altruistic* ($F(1, 82) = 6.990$, $p = 0.010$), more *wealthy* ($F(1, 82) = 3.877$, $p = 0.052$), more *kind* ($F(1, 82) = 3.764$, $p = 0.056$), and even more *attractive* ($F(1, 82) = 6.466$, $p = 0.013$) than the nonsignaler. In terms of perceived *trustworthiness* ($F(1, 82) = 2.669$, $p = 0.106$) no significant difference was found. As predicted, the male who signals about his tendency to engage in prosocial, altruistic acts (organic food choices in this case) is, indeed, perceived as more respected, altruistic, and affluent by other males than a male who does not signal about this. That is, this signal (favoring organic foods) has been interpreted by the receivers as an indicator of not only access to abundant resources (wealth), but also a higher tendency to share them with others in the name of the greater good (merging of altruism and status²). Because these traits are generally perceived as desirable, organic foods can be construed to possess reputational signal value and therefore consumers can signal their status by favoring such foods.

The application of the costly signaling theory in an intramale context imposes one crucial question: for whose benefit do these resources and altruistic tendencies accrue? As already discussed, men inherently make speedy “us” vs. “them” categorizations about other men, and according to the theory of parochial altruism, if a person feels that he belongs to the same in-group with a nonkin individual, he has a tendency to behave more altruistically toward him. Thus, if a signaling male is more positively perceived by other males in terms of most of the traits studied, it is logical to assume that this person has been viewed as belonging to the in-group. That is, the male signal receiver could have believed—because the organic logo has activated the feeling of belonging to the same in-group—that the resources and altruistic tendencies of the signal sender

are beneficial explicitly for him. Furthermore, the unexpected finding concerning *attractiveness* also implies that the signaling male has been perceived to be more or less a friend rather than a foe.

If this is really the case, then the signaling male should also be more favorably treated. According to the results related to the charity donation task, this indeed is the case. That is, the male signaler received more of the donated money: the average donations were €11.36 for the signaler and €5.79 for the nonsignaler. This difference was statistically significant ($U = 703$, $p = 0.010$). Thus, on the basis of this experiment, a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is perceived as an in-group member rather than an out-group member by male signal receivers. Taken together, these results show that favoring organic foods meets the criteria of a costly signal (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005) in that it is observable (differences between the label vs. nonlabel conditions), costly (price premium), associated with status (higher status ratings), and, ultimately, beneficial to the signaler (reception of larger donations).

These findings do not imply, however, that a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods would be perceived as an in-group member by other males in all sociocultural contexts. Namely, according to the costly signaling theory, status is associated with prosociality, but what is perceived as prosocial differs between cultures and subcultures (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). In modern Western societies, sustainable consumption choices are generally viewed as prosocial, but in developing or emerging countries, prosociality can be understood differently due to a number of social problems that lessen the perceived importance of the state of the environment.

One of the key assumptions in the status consumption literature is that the urban–rural divide influences the demand for status items (Chao & Schor, 1998). Consequently, even within highly developed Western countries, there may be variations in terms of how status-seeking behaviors and/or favoring organic foods are viewed. In rural areas, a male’s tendency to favor organic foods may appear as less prosocial and the male signal sender may actually be perceived and treated as an out-group member by male signal receivers

² Status can be achieved through many ways: dominance, favoring prestige products, such as luxury brands, and finally self-sacrificing, altruistic acts (see Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013, p. 378). In this paper, the last status-seeking strategy is in focus.

Table 2. Mean Ratings (\pm SD) of the Studied Six Traits in the Label vs. No Label Conditions.

Perception	Organic Label Condition ($n = 34$)		Nonlabel Condition ($n = 35$)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Status	4.44	1.26	4.91	1.09
Wealth	4.00	1.41	4.26	1.07
Attractiveness	3.78	1.57	3.80	1.72
Kindness	5.41	1.18	5.51	0.99
Trustworthiness	5.00	1.21	5.17	1.08
Altruism	4.48	1.09	4.62	1.02

Note: Scale 1–7: 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree.

because of the differences in commonsense knowledge related to natural foods between city dwellers and countryside residents (Kooijmans & Flores-Palacios, 2014). This possibility was investigated by collecting another data set from a rural area of the same Western country. It enables the exploration of the role of sociocultural context in male–male status signaling through favoring organic foods.

STUDY 2: TESTING IN A RURAL SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

To reiterate, the first study showed that, in an urban sociocultural context, a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is favorably perceived and treated by other males receiving this signal. This suggests that the male who received the signal has interpreted the male who sent it as an in-group member or a friend. Study 2 explores the possibility that in a rural sociocultural context, a corresponding male signal sender is interpreted as an out-group member or as a foe.

Methodology

Participants and Design. The study design was identical to that of study 1. A total of 69 male food fair guests (mean age = 42.4 years, 26.1% with a high education level, 10.1% single, median yearly income €40,000–€69,999) were approached in a small countryside town (population < 15,000) on three consecutive weekdays; those whose place of residence was not in a countryside were excluded from the study. They were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions and asked to form an impression of: (1) a male person wearing an organic-labeled white T-shirt ($n = 34$), or (2) a male person wearing a blank white T-shirt ($n = 35$).

Procedure and Materials. The questionnaire, pictures, instructions, and progress of the study were exactly the same as in study 1. The reliability coefficients were as follows: *status* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.758$), *wealth* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.779$), *attractiveness* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.947$), *kindness* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.776$),

trustworthiness (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.784$), and *altruism* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.666$).

Results and Discussion

Table 2 reports the means and SDs for the six traits studied. As can be seen, all of the differences detected in favor of the pro-organic male signaler found in study 1 have disappeared: *status* ($F(1, 67) = 2.484$, $p = 0.120$), *altruism* ($F(1, 67) = 0.296$, $p = 0.588$), *wealth* ($F(1, 67) = 0.824$, $p = 0.367$), *attractiveness* ($F(1, 67) = 0.003$, $p = 0.959$), *trustworthiness* ($F(1, 67) = 0.386$, $p = 0.537$), and *kindness* ($F(1, 67) = 0.154$, $p = 0.696$). In fact, even though the conventional level of statistical significance was not reached, the male signaler was perceived more negatively along all the traits studied by male signal receivers in a rural sociocultural context. Thus, as predicted, letting other males know about his habit of favoring organic foods is not viewed as a prosocial status signal in all communities—this is a radical finding in a highly developed and culturally homogeneous Western country in which environmentalism, such as sustainable consumption choices, is generally viewed as prosocial.

Viewing these results from the male–male status-signaling perspective indicates that in a rural sociocultural context, a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is unfavorably perceived by the male signal receivers because they have interpreted him as an out-group member or a foe. Interestingly, the prosocial status-signal sender was perceived by the signal receivers as less wealthy (albeit the difference was not statistically significant), even though they think that organic foods are generally more expensive than conventionally produced food ($M = 4.26$ on a 5-point scale, see study 1). The parochial altruism theory can explain this apparently illogical result. Namely, one of its key tenets is not to deny the possession of resources from those nonkin individuals who are seen to represent out-group members (Bernhard et al., 2006). It is just that these resources are assumed to benefit someone else, not one's own or the tribe's (in-group) interests.

If the pro-organic signaler is really perceived as an out-group member or a foe, then this male should also be less favorably treated. According to the results pertaining to the charity donation task, this is the case.

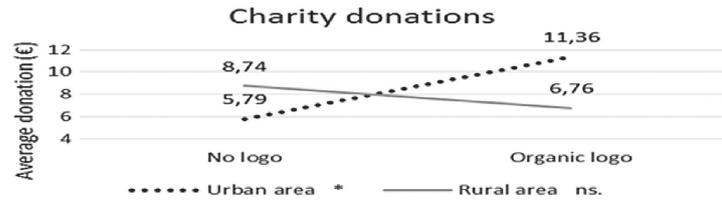


Figure 1. Average charity donations for the signaler and nonsignaler in the urban vs. rural sociocultural contexts.



Figure 2. Interaction effects of prosocial status signaling and sociocultural context on how the signaler is perceived.

Whereas in study 1 the male signaler received statistically more of the donated money, in study 2, the average donations were €6.76 for the signaler and €8.74 for the nonsignaler. Even though this difference was not statistically significant ($U = 556,500$, $p = 0.635$), the donation behavior is different from that seen in study 1 (Figure 1). Thus, on the basis of this field experiment, it is likely that a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is perceived as an out- rather than in-group member (or a foe) by other males receiving this signal in a rural sociocultural context.

More evidence for this key inference was sought by pooling the data sets from studies 1 and 2 together (recall that measured variables were exactly the same) so that the interactive effect of prosocial status signaling (organic logo: present vs. absent) and sociocultural context (area: urban vs. rural) on how the signal sender is perceived could be investigated with the help of two-way analysis of variance. A statistically significant interaction effect would offer more credence on the basic claims that have been presented above. Indeed, this effect surfaces in relation to *status* ($F(3, 153) = 8.96$, $p = 0.003$), *altruism* ($F(3, 153) = 4.029$, $p = 0.047$), and *wealth* ($F(3, 153) = 3.97$, $p = 0.048$; Figure 2), but not in relation to *attractiveness* ($F(3, 153) = 2.179$, $p = 0.142$), *kindness* ($F(3, 153) = 2.401$, $p = 0.123$), and *trustworthiness* ($F(3, 153) = 2.344$, $p = 0.128$).³ As regards the donation variable, this (parametric) analysis was not conducted, because the donation data were not normally distributed.

In summary, four academically novel insights emerge from this research. First, favoring organic foods

in socially visible ways can act as a costly signal. Second, in an urban context, a male signaling about his status through favoring organic foods is more positively perceived and treated by males receiving this signal (the in-group member or friend interpretation). Third, in a rural context, pro-organic male signaler is more negatively perceived and treated by males receiving this signal (the out-group member or foe interpretation). Fourth, the sociocultural context can moderate the effects of prosocial status signaling.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The application of evolutionary-driven theories of costly signaling (Zahavi, 1975) and parochial altruism (Bernhard et al., 2006) to the study of status signaling has advanced scholarly thinking in the field of consumer behavior research. First, the relevance of prosocial status signaling among male consumers was showcased. Second, the benefits for the prosocial status signaler were demonstrated to extend to how other people behave toward him or her. Third, the study responded to calls for investigating the role of sociocultural context in status signaling by presenting promising empirical results. Fourth, a previously unrecognized arena for status signaling (organic food consumption) was identified. Next, the theoretical and managerial implications, study limitations, and future research suggestions are discussed in more detail.

Theoretical Implications

All status-signaling strivings, including both selfish and prosocial, are powered by evolutionary forces and motives (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). This has created a deeply ingrained human psychology that is

³ It must be noted that the sociodemographic profile of the study participants was not identical in the urban and the rural contexts (see Participants and Design section). However, none of the factors (age, level of education, yearly income, and marital status) had any effect on the dependent measures (all p -values > 0.05).

automatically and nonconsciously sensitive to the content and sender characteristics of status signals (McDonald, Navarrete, & Van Vugt, 2012). In fact, reputational concerns have been postulated to be associated with certain neural mechanisms in the brain (Izuma, 2012)—a hallmark of a psychological process that has been subjected to a long-standing selection pressure. The high sensitivity to reputational issues manifested itself in the present examination by the effect of relatively subtle manipulation of the signal sender characteristics (absence/presence of small-sized logo in an otherwise information-rich picture—cf. Brasel & Gips, 2011; Park & John, 2014). The key implication of the preceding discussion is that status-signaling studies should predominantly utilize research methodologies that are capable of tapping into consumers' nonconscious processes and responses.

One prominent research genre that focuses on nonconscious effects on consumer behavior is that of priming (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008; Sela & Shiv, 2009; Wheeler & Berger, 2007). The discoveries from priming research are potentially helpful in understanding the results concerning the moderating effect of urban vs. rural sociocultural context. Namely, Wheeler and Berger (2007) have marshaled evidence against the unequivocal impact of prime cues. The same prime can actually lead to different or even opposite behavioral effects in distinct consumer groups due to unique motivational associations with the prime. Hence, the same priming cue (organic logo on a T-shirt) could carry negative associations for rural, but simultaneously positive connotations for urban consumers. This would explain why rural males receiving the prosocial (organic) status signal tended to view its sender as an out-group member (or a foe) and why urban males tended to classify its sender as an in-group member (or a friend). This speaks for the importance of controlling the meanings attached to the prosocial status signals among the consumer groups that are targeted for research.

It is surprising that the gender specificity (intersex and intrasex) of status signaling and luxury consumption have caught the eye of consumer researchers only very recently. Male–female status signaling through material possessions and luxury products can be viewed as a mate attraction strategy (Sundie et al., 2011) or an expression of mate value (Janssens et al., 2011); women in particular are capable of correctly reading the underlying motives behind this kind of male signaling (Lens, Driesmans, Pandelaere, & Janssens, 2012; Sundie et al., 2011). Females send status signals to other women too in order to improve their social standing in a peer group (Durante, Griskevicius, Cantú, & Simpson, 2014) or to deter them from poaching the signal sender's relationship partner (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). In the case of prosocial status signaling, gender-specificities are a virtually unexplored phenomenon. A lone example is the study by Van Vugt and Iredale (2013) describing how men contributed to charity more in the presence of an opposite sex audience. The intragender emphasis of the present study

produced an up-to-date glimpse into the rich world of male–male prosocial status signaling. To conclude, it seems imperative that the gender-specificity perspective is incorporated into future studies addressing status signaling, be it through material possessions and luxury products or prosocial consumption choices (Meyers-Levy & Loken, 2015).

The present study has uncovered that favoring organic foods entails social status value. This is corroborated by the recent research conducted within the consumer culture theory-paradigm (Carfagna et al., 2014; Elliot, 2013). In other words, while not appreciated before, food consumption can act as an arena for status signaling. Yet, it is well established that consumers' self-reported reasons for favoring organic foods do not typically include reputation management, but healthiness, tastiness, safety, and environmental concerns (Hjelmar, 2011; Van Doorn & Verhoef, 2011). Consequently, additional organic food consumption studies are well advised to take both the explicit and socially accepted choice motives (taste, health, safety, and ethicality) and implicit and socially disapproved choice motives (status signaling) into account at the same time. It is an empirical question which choice motives exert the greatest influence under various circumstances.

Study Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

As always, some study limitations can be identified. At the same time, they present opportunities for further research. This study concentrated on how a male sending a prosocial status signal is perceived and treated by other males reading this signal. Thus, it is not possible to take a stand on how a female prosocial signal sender is perceived and treated by either a female or male signal receiver (this also holds for the case of a male sender and female receiver). In other words, the generalizability of the findings beyond the male–male setup is left for future research to (dis)confirm.

It must be acknowledged that the measure for how the sender of a prosocial status signal was treated by the signal receiver was based on self-reported behavioral intention, not on actual behavior. Thus, these findings need to be validated by studies collecting data concerning the signal receivers' real actions toward the prosocial signal sender in a naturalistic context (e.g., collecting charity donations for local heart foundations—Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) or in a controlled laboratory setting (e.g., dictator game). Are there other arenas of social life (selection of group leaders and business partners) where senders of prosocial status signals are more favorably treated? More research is required before an answer to these questions can be given.

Even though an explanatory psychological mechanism (in- vs. out-group interpretation) for the key results (favorable vs. unfavorable perception and treatment of the prosocial status signal sender by the urban

vs. rural signal receivers) was proposed, only inferential empirical evidence could be presented to back it up. Thus, the causal logic claimed to be in operation still requires experimental validation. For example, brand communities offer an intriguing opportunity for investigating the intricacies of in- and out-group signaling, social dynamics, impression management, and shared consciousness (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013). Food swapper communities that are motored by consumers' sustainability concerns make a case in point (Carfagna et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the sociocultural context must be operationalized in ways that go beyond the urban-rural distinction (e.g., in terms of ethnicity or lifestyle groups). In a similar vein, other potential prosocial status signals such as favoring fair trade or local foods should be addressed. In any case, the associations related to whatever prosocial status signal is being investigated must be controlled for in the sociocultural context where the fieldwork takes place. One limitation of the present study is that no direct information was collected on urban and rural consumers' associations or purchasing frequency regarding organic food.

Finally, it was suggested that the prosocial costly signal of favoring organic foods is associated with certain unobservable, yet desirable, qualities (status, altruism, and wealth) of an individual. This was indeed the case in an urban but not in a rural context. Yet, it could be asked if this really is the whole story? For instance, it is known that when consumers are informed that a certain food is organic, they find it healthier than foods they are told are conventionally produced (Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013), even though it has not been scientifically proved that an organic food diet is nutritionally superior to a nonorganic food diet. This raises the question of whether those consumers who signal about their status through favoring organic foods are also perceived as being healthier.

Managerial Implications

It is well documented throughout the Western world that consumers report that it is the high prices of organic foods that prevent them from increasing their green food consumption (Jensen, Denver, & Zanoli, 2011). However, economic incentives (i.e., lowering the price) could mitigate the social status value of organic food consumption. Consequently, priming status motives in the sales environment of organic foods might be a more effective way to enhance their desirability in spite of higher prices (Griskevicius et al., 2010).

Second, several studies have demonstrated that consumers are willing to act in sustainable ways especially when the act is visible to others (Kimura et al., 2012; Milinski, Semmann, Krambeck, & Marotzke, 2006). In addition to making the selling location of organic foods more visible and public, creative retailers can develop conspicuous materials (shopping bags, badges, stickers, etc.) that can be used in signaling about one's

sustainable choices to others in order to stimulate more business and build brand image.

Third, the dramatic change in the results as a function of the sociocultural context invokes the idea of building distinct brand images for organic food in urban and rural surroundings. To illustrate, in rural retail outlets, organic foods could be promoted for their good taste, healthiness, and reasonable price. The products could be placed among conventional foods and the packages should probably not feature conspicuous "organic" labels. In contrast, in urban commercial locations, organic foods might fare better when they are sold in separate and socially visible places with high prices and unmistakable "organic" cues on their packaging. Here, the core marketing message could highlight that choosing these products helps the environment and other people to prosper.

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APPENDIX

Pictures in the questionnaire shown to participants (faces were visible).



Does Organic Food Consumption Signal Prosociality?: An Application of Schwartz's Value Theory

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Abstract

Current research suggests that sustainable consumption choices (including favoring organic foods) can act as signals of prosociality. However, who actually perceives such acts as indicators of prosocial, altruistic tendencies is still unclear. Through an online survey (n=168) and by using personal value priorities (Schwartz's theory of values) as IVs, the present study sheds light on this issue. First, the results suggest that organic food consumption can confer the valuable signal of prosociality – and some other socially valued traits were also associated with this everyday behavior strategy. Then, the study shows that the interpretation of the signal is dependent on respondents' positioning in Schwartz's value circumplex. Intriguingly, in addition to those people who endorse self-transcendence values, people with conservative value priorities also view the presumed organic consumer as prosocial. These impressions are further mediated by more specific organic food attitudes, thereby forming a value-attitude-impression relationship. The implications are outlined.

Keywords: organic food, prosociality, status, consumer impression, Schwartz's value theory

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1. Introduction

Consumers' attitude toward organically produced foods is usually positive (Marian et al., 2014, p. 52). This is the result of the favorable beliefs encompassing them – promoting the attainment of both prosocial and more ego-centric goals – such as environmental friendliness, animal welfare, superior taste, healthiness or food safety (Hemmerling, Hamm, & Spiller, 2015; Hughner et al., 2007; Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013). However, mainly due to high prices, their consumption has remained relatively low, even throughout the Western world (less than 10% at best – Kaad-Hansen, 2017). As organic food represents a more sustainable production method (Scalco et al., 2017, p. 236), a critical question then concerns how to increase this share in spite of the substantial price premium. It is suggested here that a better understanding of the social signal value of favoring organic food (cf. Puska et al., 2018) can be helpful with regard to this issue.

Value orientations are useful for understanding and even explaining prosocial behavior (Schwartz, 2010). It has been suggested that a tendency to act in an environmentally friendly way is rooted in personal value priorities (Thøgersen, Zhou, & Huang, 2016). Several studies applying Schwartz's (1992, 1994, 2012) theory of values have concluded that those people who endorse so-called self-transcendence values (universalism in particular) are most willing to make organic food choices (e.g., Thøgersen, 2011; Zepeda & Deal, 2009), whereas those who cherish self-enhancement values are most unlikely to favor any sustainable options (see Karp, 1996; Steg, 2015). Due to their abstract nature, however, values do not necessarily affect behaviors directly but indirectly through mediating concepts, such as more specific beliefs and attitudes (see Dreezens et al., 2005). A value-attitude-behavior relationship has been identified in several sustainability contexts (Thøgersen et al., 2016, p. 215).

One central feature of values is that they also guide our evaluations of fellow people (Schwartz, 1992, 2006). It is well known that people make inferences about others based on their consumption choices; such inferences are often related to the person's social status (e.g., level of prestige or wealth) or to his/her social identity, preferences and worldview (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Han, Nunes, & Dreze, 2010; Holt, 1998; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). An intriguing recent finding is that organic food consumption can elucidate impressions relating to prosocial status. The experimental study of Puska et al. (2016) revealed not only that a person who seemed to be "pro-organic" (vs. a nearly identical control person) was viewed as more altruistic and respected – hallmarks of prosociality appreciated by all cultures, cf. Soler, 2012 – but also that the person was more favorably treated (reception of larger charity donations).

Although many other studies have also dealt with the relationship between prosociality and organic food consumption (see e.g., Eskine, 2013; Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2011), the fact who actually makes these inferences related to socially valued traits about organic consumers is still unclear. That is, is the person who favors organic in food choices valued by all consumers or just by some? By using Schwartz's classic main value classes as IVs, the current paper aims to shed light on this issue.

Filling in this gap is important, as the results of Puska et al. (2016) indicate that favoring organic food (a relatively inexpensive, everyday act) might be a useful behavior strategy: people with a prosocial reputation are generally perceived as more desirable leaders, allies, friends and even romantic partners (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010, p. 393; Kafashan et al., 2014). At first glance, one might think that those who are the most pro-organic (i.e., people with self-transcendence and a universalistic worldview) are also those who perceive the organic consumer – a member of their in-group, cf. Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000 – most favorably. However, due to this valuable social signaling function, the case may be more complicated; in addition to "true believers", "opportunist" or "rival" assessments are also possible (cf. Puska et al., 2016). Furthermore, organic food also emits a symbolism congruent with Schwartz's other main value classes (see Aertsens et al., 2009), which, in turn, may have an elevating impact on observers' organic consumer judgments (cf. Allen, Gupta, & Monnier, 2008).

To conclude, through an online survey (n=168), the current work investigates who truly values the organic consumer. By doing so, it contributes to the understanding of organic food consumption and consumer research in the following ways. First, the results suggest that organic food consumption can be perceived as a signal of prosocial, altruistic tendencies. The main finding of the research is that the prosociality impression is dependent on respondents' positioning in Schwartz's value circumplex, which, in turn, is mediated by more specific organic food attitudes, thereby forming a value-attitude-

impression relationship. The synthesis of the ideas from Schwartz's value theory (1992, 1994, 2006, 2010, 2012), the value-attitude-behavior-hierarchies, (in)congruity accounts and research on prosocial status signaling in this highly mundane consumption context (Thøgersen, Jørgensen, & Sandager, 2012) represents the other novelty value of the study.

2. Conceptual underpinnings

2.1 Schwartz's value theory and prosociality

The current study draws on Schwartz's thoroughly validated theory of values (1992, 1994, 2012), which is grounded on three universal requirements of human existence: 1) the biological needs of individuals, 2) coordinated social interaction between individuals, and 3) survival and welfare needs of groups. Accordingly, human values represent individual responses to the abovementioned three desires in the form of conscious goals. The theory suggests that values and their structure represent the universal organization of human motivations. However, individuals and groups differ substantially in the relative importance they attribute to values. In other words, individuals and groups have different "value priorities".

The theory identifies ten motivationally distinct types of values and specifies the dynamic relations among them. Some values conflict with one another (e.g., benevolence and power), whereas others are compatible (e.g., conformity and security). The "structure" of values refers to these relations of conflict and congruence among values. Two orthogonal dimensions summarize the integrated structure (Schwartz, 2012): the vertical dimension of 'self enhancement–self-transcendence' contrasts the values of power and achievement (which emphasize the pursuit of self-interest) with the values of universalism and benevolence (which involve concern for the welfare and interests of others). The horizontal dimension of 'openness to change–conservation', in turn, contrasts the values of self-direction and stimulation (which emphasize independent thought and readiness for new experiences) with the values of security, conformity, and tradition (which involve self-restriction, order, and resistance to change). Hedonism conceptually shares elements of both 'openness-to-change' and 'self-enhancement'. The ten values and their relationships are presented in Figure 1.

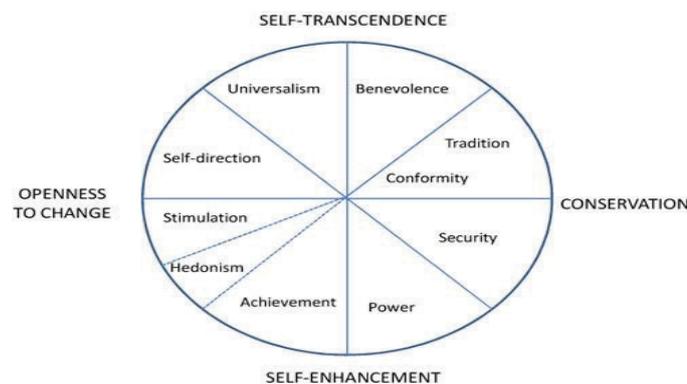


Figure 1. Schwartz's value theory: A circumplex structure of ten value classes clustered in four main value domains in a two-dimensional space.

Schwartz (2010) has further suggested that some value orientations are more prone to prosocial behavior, and according to his theory (Schwartz, 1992, 2006), they also influence evaluations of someone's prosociality. It is important to stress that in social sciences, the dominant assumption seems to be that the main motivational factor for prosocial behavior is altruism (see Carlo et al., 2016) – the current paper assumes the same. Fundamentally altruism refers to acts aiming to help others without any interest in gaining benefits. In its purest form it is "selflessness" – a highly valued trait in all societies. However, because altruistic acts (especially when conducted repeatedly) are costly – they simply deplete the givers resources that are needed for other everyday actions, cf. Barrett, Dunbar, and Lycett, 2002 – there is an ongoing debate by different disciplines, whether humans are actually capable of true altruism (see Clavien & Klein, 2010).

Evolutionary-driven perspectives tend to suggest that there is no such thing as pure altruism towards non-kin members who cannot reciprocate (e.g., Van Vugt & Van Lange, 2006). Similarly, irrespective of evolutionary accounts, a rational economic perspective (Dawes & Thaler, 1988) considers the existence of altruism to be puzzling (i.e., a theoretical anomaly). That is, although the general discussion of prosociality often views altruism as a behavior performed for the utility of others, in many cases, it has also self-interest origins. However, people's judgments of others – whether someone is perceived as prosocial or not – are caused by a feeling or sense, and observers cannot actually certain whether a person acts from self-interest or not.

Schwartz (2010) argues that the most frequently relevant values in the case of prosociality are universalism, benevolence, conformity, security, and power, although each of the ten values might be relevant to prosocial behavior under some conditions. Whereas the first three values tend to emphasize prosociality, the latter two might work against it. Benevolence values concern the welfare of the in-group, and universalism values the welfare of all. Thus, universalists are considered the most prosocial in their orientation. Self-transcendence values provide an internalized motivational base to voluntarily promote the welfare of others, whereas conformity values promote prosocial behavior in order to avoid negative outcomes for the self. Thus, in the latter case, prosociality is a type of a trade-off.

Contrary to these positive links between values and prosociality, security and power values typically oppose prosocial behavior. They are motivated by the maintenance of a stable, protective environment. For example, security values focus on self-interest goals instead of macro-level goals. These values deter actions on others' behalf that might entail risk to the status quo. However, self-entertainment values (power and achievement) emphasize self-interest and competitive advantage. If one pursues social approval, it may elicit prosocial behavior in situations where it will bring public acclaim (Schwartz, 2010).

Thus, what the theory suggests is that there are multiple mechanisms that can trigger prosocial behavior – and some values are more connected to these acts than others – but how they eventually affect our evaluations of others prosociality, might be more complex and more context specific than is currently known. The social signal value of favoring prosocial products may also play a role in how an organic consumer is viewed (e.g., truly altruistic vs. seemingly altruistic).

Finally, the abstract nature of values must also be taken into account (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2006). That is, although values are useful for understanding prosocial behaviors, they do not necessarily guide actions directly – evaluations of organic consumers in this case – but indirectly through mediating concepts such as more specific attitudes (cf. Dreezens et al., 2005). Value-attitude-behavior relationships – flowing explicitly in this order and not the other way around – have been identified in many sustainable consumption contexts (e.g., Best & Mayerl, 2013). In the organic food realm, it is understood that the higher likelihood of consumers with a universalistic value base favoring these products is often mediated by a more specific attitude intention (Thøgersen et al., 2016). In a similar vein, it is expected here that the values do not affect the evaluations directly but indirectly through an organic food attitude that is the result of the interplay between a person's value priorities and beliefs regarding organic food that are prioritized over other values and beliefs (cf. Krystallis et al., 2012).

2.2 Organic food consumption – signals of prosociality or signaling prosociality?

Organic food consumption is often associated with a value-driven lifestyle. It is assumed that organic food consumption results from an ideology that is connected to a particular value system that affects personality measures, attitudes and consumption behavior (Schifferstein & Ophuis, 1998, p. 119). Organic food consumers' value priorities are then perceived to be highly similar to those of proenvironmental behavior in general (e.g., Honkanen, Verplanken, & Olsen 2006; Thøgersen & Ölander, 2006). Universalism has been found to be the dominant value guiding consumers' purchase of organic food (Thøgersen et al., 2016). In fact, when universalism is controlled, no other value is both positively and significantly related to organic food purchases (Dreezens et al., 2005; Thøgersen, 2011). Research has produced similar results in Western Europe, North America and emerging economies and in relation to fair trade foods (Thøgersen et al., 2016, p. 216). However, in light of the current knowledge, organic food consumption does not always indicate self-transcendence but may attract consumers who wish to be viewed as prosocial (Puska et al., 2018). In turn, some level of awareness of this signaling function might affect how the organic consumer is viewed.

Extensive evidence has recently been developed on the social signal value of favoring sustainable products (e.g., Costa, Zepeda, & Sirieix, 2014; Delgado, Harriger, & Khanna, 2015; Elliot, 2013; Rana & Paul, 2017; Van der Wal, Van Horen, & Grinstein, 2016). The top purchase reasons for relatively expensive hybrid cars, for example, have been shown to be in many cases reputational instead of environmental concerns (Maynard, 2007). In the study of Griskevicius et al. (2010), activating status motives caused consumers to favor, paradoxically, less luxurious green products over more luxurious nongreen products in a wide range of categories. It is noteworthy that the “going green to be seen” effect manifested when the green products were more expensive (but not when less) than the nongreen products. In the organic food context, a case in point is provided by the study of Puska et al. (2016). It revealed that a male who signaled his status through favoring organic foods – compared to a male who did not – was not only perceived as more respected and altruistic (hallmarks of prosociality) but was also more favorably treated by other males witnessing the signaling (reception of larger charity donations).

Conceptually, in the consumption realm, signaling prosociality has been explained through the competitive altruism perspective of the costly signaling theory (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Puska et al., 2016, 2018). Accordingly, signals sent by favoring a sustainable alternative communicate that the actor is not a selfish individual but is willing to sacrifice for the benefit of others and possesses the resources to do so (cf. wealth) (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). In turn, sending this (seemingly) prosocial signal is believed to manifest in positive evaluations and finally more favorable treatment on behalf of signal receivers, thereby helping the signaler climb up in the peer group hierarchy.

Hence, although the general discussion on organic foods associates their consumption with self-transcendence values, it can also have more self-interested origins – and this may complicate the assessments of prosociality (or viewing someone in a positive light more generally). To briefly illustrate this complexity, the most logical providers of positive evaluations, people with *self-transcendence* values, might possess – because they are “true believers” – some skepticism toward the organic consumer concerning to his/her true motives (cf. Thøgersen, 2011). In turn, people who endorse *self-enhancement* values – perhaps the most unlikely providers of positive interpretations (see Dreezens et al. 2005) – might not view organic consumers in a very positive light. However, power and achievement are those very values that can contribute to one wishing to send status signals of prosociality by favoring sustainable alternatives (Schwartz, 2010).

In addition, organic food emits a symbolism congruent with all of Schwartz’s main value classes (see Aertsens et al., 2009). This is an important notion because it is well known that people tend to (dis)like entities that have (in)congruent symbolism with their self-concepts (see Sirgy, 1982). That is, congruent symbolism may have an elevating impact on observers’ organic consumer judgments and vice versa (cf. Allen et al., 2008; Puska et al., 2018). Specifically, *conservatism* values do not fundamentally go hand by hand with prosocial acts in Schwartz’s value theory (1992, 1994, 2012). Security values, for instance, often focus on self-interest goals, thereby deterring actions on others’ behalf that might entail risk to the status quo – the antecedents of a less positive interpretation. However, many key features of organic food (healthiness and food safety are the most important) are congruent with the conservative worldview (Caracciolo et al., 2016).

The case is similar for *progressive* values. A hedonistic value orientation, for example, fundamentally guides one to attain individual utility, but many characteristics of organic food, in particular superior taste and “higher quality” (e.g., freshness), are inextricably congruent with this worldview (Aertsens et al., 2009).

In summary, organic food presents more or less (in)compatible symbolism with all of Schwartz’s value bases, and its consumption provides a powerful signaling function. In other words, it appears impossible to a priori determine who truly values the organic consumer. How the values of observers are associated with prosociality impressions is empirically investigated next. Before that, however, based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed to guide this quest:

H1. Those consumers who favor organic foods are viewed as more prosocial than consumers who do not.

H2. Observing consumers’ value priorities moderate the extent to which the organic food favorer is perceived as prosocial.

3. Method

The main interest of the study was to investigate who values the organic consumer. It was also proposed that one's organic food attitude mediates the impression. To that end, it was important to verify that organic foods can indeed signal socially valued traits such as prosociality and that attitudes toward them are positive. In addition, evidence was needed to determine 1) whether this mundane habit – organic food consumption – communicates about other desirable characteristics, and 2) whether there are specific product-type differences in carrying the signal (see Ellison et al., 2016). After thorough scouting of food markets, four products were selected for the study (which appear in both organic and conventional form): ketchup, butter, bacon and yogurt. These products were chosen because they represent well-known product types and are clearly distinct with symbolic meanings (highly processed, indulgent, meat and dairy), thus allowing conclusions regarding the moderating effect of the product type. The product pairs were virtually identical, manufactured by the same brand, and available in both forms during the study.

3.1 Participants and design

An online survey was conducted among consumer panelists of a Finnish market research company. All study participants (n=168) came from the Helsinki metropolitan area. The sample consisted of 49.4% men, and the most common household yearly income levels were 40000-69999 € (22%), 70000-89999 € (20%) and 20000-39999 € (19%). Participants' mean age was 47.6 years (SD=16.92) and the majority of them (64%) lived in children-free households of one or two people¹. The study employed a four-group between-subjects design. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of two conditions in which they were asked to form an image of a consumer who was presented as a regular user of either organic or conventional ketchup/butter/bacon/yogurt. They were also asked to indicate their (un)favorable attitude toward these products and reveal their value priorities.

3.2 Procedure and questionnaire

Consumer panelists received an e-mail requesting them to participate in an academic consumer impression survey. No incentives for participation were given. The online platform utilized was previously used by the author; it did not allow a participant, for instance, to move forward on the survey before answering all the questions on a given page (nor was it possible to go back to the previous page). Background characteristics were asked first (sex, age, place of residence and household income level, size and number of children living there). Then, the consumer image (DV) was measured. Specifically, photos of food products (see the Appendix for an example) were shown one at a time, and participants were asked to indicate how they perceive a regular user of that product. This questioning-logic – also referred to as the “user-imagery”-approach – has a long tradition in consumer research; it has been applied to uncover product and brand images (Parker, 2009) and their effects on consumer perceptions and attitudes (Liu et al., 2012). Here, it was used to track the images typical users of organic and conventional foods evoke in the minds of others.

Prosociality impressions were measured using the 9-point semantic differentials scale based on *unselfish-selfish*, *indifferent-caring* and *rude-nice* (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Aaker's (1997) main dimensions of brand personality (*excitement*, *sophistication*, *ruggedness*, *competence* and *sincerity*) were used to check whether organic food consumption also signals other (more or less) socially valued characteristics (cf. Fennis & Pruyn, 2007). These dimensions were chosen because one of the key premises of the study is that similar to well-known brands (Apple, Tesla, etc.), *organic food* can itself be viewed as a brand (cf. Ellison et al., 2016), and therefore, it can possess a personality. Furthermore, according to Aaker (1997), some of these dimensions are logically associated with prosociality (sincerity) or more traditional high status (sophistication and competence).

¹ Corresponding average information of Finnish population are (2018): mean age 42.5 years, 49.3 % of men, 26.4 % lives in Helsinki metropolitan area, 38 500 € is average yearly household income and most of the Finns live in children-free households of 1-2 (78%). Thus, in terms of age, household type, yearly income and place of residence, the collected sample does not correspond to average Finnish population. These statistics are available in English on request at www.tilastokeskus.fi.

Photos of three filler food products were also included in every questionnaire to mask the actual purpose of the research; they remained the same in all questionnaires (conventionally produced bread cheese, sirloin steak and banana). In a nutshell, regular users of each product were evaluated in terms of eight impression dimensions. After the consumer image questions, attitudes toward all the studied products were measured. Specifically, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1=not at all to 5=very) how positively they perceive the products. Then, before investigating participants' value priorities, certain control questions were presented (e.g., familiarity with the products and brand attitudes). Schwartz's short ten-item measure (see Lindeman & Verkasalo, 2005) was used to determine the value priorities. To be more precise, participants were asked to indicate in the case of each main value cluster (see Figure 1) on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1=not at all to 7=very) how important it is to him/her. Short verbal descriptions were offered about the content of each value class (*power, achievement, universalism, benevolence, stimulation, self-direction, hedonism, self-direction, conformity and tradition*) to facilitate scoring. All the data analyses are performed using the software program SPSS.

4. Results

4.1 Consumer impressions and food production method attitudes

Table 1 illustrates the impression differences. As it reveals – in line with the first hypothesis (H1) – regular user of organic food received the higher mean value of prosociality in all four product pairs (vs. regular user of conventional food). However, only in the case of bacon and yogurt (i.e., 2/4) this difference is statistically significant. One index measure for prosociality was determined by combining the three semantic differentials of unselfish-selfish, indifferent-caring and unkind-kind (α 's ranged from .684 to .866). One-way ANOVA produced the following results regarding food favored by the participants: ketchup [F(1,79)=1.336, $p=.185$, $d=.29$], butter [F(1,79)=1.418, $p=.160$, $d=.30$], yogurt [F(1,85)=2.253, $p=.027$, $d=.51$] and bacon [F(1,85)=3.854, $p<.001$, $d=.82$].

Table 1. Impressions of favoring organic vs. conventional food products.

Impression	Ketchup (n=40 & n=41) Organic Conventional Means (SD):		Butter (n=40 & n=41) Organic Conventional Means (SD):	
	Prosociality	5.90 (1.29) a	5.55 (1.10) a	5.99 (1.48) a
Excitement	5.03 (1.51) a	4.63 (1.69) a	5.73 (1.52) a	5.27 (1.62) a
Sophistication	5.35 (1.39) a	4.80 (1.75) a	6.00 (1.66) a	5.63 (1.70) a
Ruggedness	4.95 (1.55) a	4.88 (1.51) a	5.68 (1.46) a	5.54 (1.72) a
Competence	5.65 (1.67) a	5.59 (1.15) a	5.73 (1.55) a	5.63 (1.58) a
Sincerity	5.93 (1.60) a	6.10 (1.33) a	6.25 (1.61) a	6.23 (1.62) a
Impression	Yogurt (n=44 & n=43) Organic Conventional Means (SD):		Bacon (n=44 & n=43) Organic Conventional Means (SD):	
	Prosociality	5.55 (1.40) b	4.88 (1.20) a	5.73 (1.16) b
Excitement	4.80 (1.86) b	4.00 (1.66) a	5.30 (1.50) a	5.09 (1.59) a
Sophistication	5.07 (1.56) b	4.28 (1.56) a	5.68 (1.24) b	4.44 (1.46) a
Ruggedness	5.02 (1.52) b	4.28 (1.60) a	5.36 (1.38) a	5.09 (1.40) a
Competence	5.45 (1.56) a	4.93 (1.53) a	5.61 (1.40) a	5.26 (1.21) a
Sincerity	5.66 (1.57) a	5.14 (1.47) a	5.93 (1.44) b	5.28 (1.50) a

Notes: Means with different superscript letters (a,b) differ significantly at $p<.05$; Scale 1-9: 1=completely disagree, 9=completely agree

Table 1 also shows that the organic consumer seems to be associated (varyingly) with other desirable and everyday-useful characteristics. To be more precise, in the case of bacon ($d=.92$) and yogurt ($d=.51$), favorer of the organic option (i.e., 2/4), was viewed as more sophisticated. Thus, the results suggest that favoring organic food could be a beneficial behavior strategy, as it appears to be capable to confer important social signal value by communicating about prosocial tendencies and other socially valued traits (cf. Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Puska et al., 2016). These differences cannot be

explained by the participants' background or the control variables (all p -values $>.10$). Next, to understand the relationships for the "organic food brand" instead of single products, the four products were collapsed together to yield an index measure for each impression. This was possible because the product type did not interact with the organic production method in relation to any dimension (p -values ranged from .141 to .582). The analysis continues with this product combination because it provides a more credible and holistic measure for investigating impressions generated through favoring organic food.

As for the consumers' organic food attitude, as might be expected, indications of the positive relationship were obtained. On a scale of 1–5, attitude toward organic food received a mean value of 3.64 (SD 1.04), while the corresponding rating in the case of conventional food was 3.35 (SD 1.13); this difference, however, is only marginally significant [$F(1,166)=2.858$, $p=.091$, $d=.26$]. The finding is in line with previous understanding (Marian et al., 2014, p. 52). It is also noteworthy that both means are well above the midpoint of the scale.

4.2 Correlations between values

As always when applying Schwartz's value theory, one can expect more or less correlation between the ten value classes depending on their position in the circumplex (see Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004, and Figure 1). It is common, for instance, that the values of security and benevolence correlate strongly with most of the values. It is also typical that most of the correlations are positive. Table 2 illustrates these relationships (significant correlations have been flagged with stars).

Table 2. Correlations between Schwartz's main values.

	Power	Achievement	Universalism	Benevolence	Stimulation	Self-direction	Hedonism	Security	Conformity	Tradition
Power	-	0.554*	-0.086	-0.229*	0.091	-0.149	-0.086	-0.272*	-0.158	-0.016
Achievement	0.554*	-	0.098	0.096	0.169	0.187	0.353*	0.052	0.032	0.116
Universalism	-0.086	0.098	-	0.637*	0.140	0.425*	0.095	0.378*	0.171	0.271*
Benevolence	-0.229*	0.096	0.637*	-	0.281*	0.524*	0.376*	0.691*	0.496*	0.381*
Stimulation	0.091	0.169	0.140	0.281*	-	0.392*	0.477*	0.197	0.154	0.332*
Self-direction	-0.149	0.187	0.425*	0.524*	0.392*	-	0.290*	0.353*	0.112	0.131
Hedonism	-0.086	0.353*	0.095	0.376*	0.477*	0.290*	-	0.317*	0.325*	0.184
Security	-0.272*	0.052	0.378*	0.691*	0.197	0.353*	0.317*	-	0.615*	0.438*
Conformity	-0.158	0.032	0.171	0.496*	0.154	0.112	0.325*	0.615*	-	0.630*
Tradition	-0.016	0.116	0.271*	0.381*	0.332*	0.131	0.184	0.438*	0.630*	-

Note: Correlations of (-)0.229 or higher are significant at $p<.0.5$, 0.290 or higher at $p<.0.1$

Next, four value indexes were formed along the main domains of Schwartz's circumplex (cf. Caracciolo et al., 2016; Costa et al., 2014). They were named 1) ethicality value (universalism, benevolence; $\alpha=.726$), 2) status value (power, achievement; $\alpha=.734$), 3) conservatism value (tradition, conformity, security; $\alpha=.798$), and 4) progressive value (self-direction, hedonism, stimulation; $\alpha=.659$). For conceptual clarity, the analysis continues with these meta-indexes. It is noteworthy that the items of all four combinations correlate positively at the level $p<.01$ (see also the α 's above).

4.3 Value priorities and organic food attitude

The correlations between the four value indexes and organic food attitude were relatively weak, which was expected per se, as the correlating concepts differ so much at the level of abstraction (top of Table 3). However, the ethicality and conservatism values have significant (albeit weak, $p<.10$)

relationships with organic food attitude. The indication of positive correlation between the ethicality values and organic food attitude is in line with the previous understanding. Environmental friendliness and animal welfare – which are beliefs that encompass organic food – are congruent with an ethical worldview. The indication of positive correlation between the conservatism values and organic food attitude is also understandable. As theorized previously, organic food has some symbolism congruent with a conservative worldview: people who endorse these values may think that organic food is healthier and safe. Organic food also has some symbolism congruent with progressive and status-seeking worldviews, such as superior taste and price, but no indications of a significant value-attitude relationship emerged.

Table 3. Correlations between value classes and (1) organic food attitude and (2) organic consumer impressions.

	Status value	Ethicality value	Progressive value	Conservatism value
Organic food attitude	-0.114	0.200 *	-0.001	0.181 *
Prosociality	0.121	0.270 **	0.229 *	0.268 **
Sincerity	0.123	0.307 ***	0.201 *	0.243 **
Competence	0.101	0.219 **	0.201 *	0.265 **
Sophistication	0.107	0.153	0.178	0.282 ***
Excitement	0.049	0.145	0.102	0.284 ***
Ruggedness	0.069	0.168	0.104	0.176

Note: Correlations with * are significant at $p < .10$, with ** at $p < .05$ and with *** at $p < .01$

4.4 Value priorities and organic consumer impressions

Table 3 also illustrates the correlations between the four value indexes and organic consumer impressions. As the table shows, the correlations follow (more or less) the same pattern as the correlations between the values and organic food attitude (i.e., the same two value indexes yielded the strongest indications of significant relationships). However, the correlations are now slightly stronger, as may be expected; people are known to evaluate others based on their consumption choices (e.g., Bellezza, Gino, & Keinan, 2013). In addition to ethical and conservative worldviews, progressive values are associated positively (albeit weakly, $p < .10$) with a prosociality impression of an organic consumer. People with these value priorities might view the organic consumer as prosocial because organic food, as an unconventional choice, could represent innovativeness and openness for new solutions – characteristics that can ultimately benefit others as well (cf. Allen et al., 2008).

As for the other measured impressions (Aaker, 1997), a positive correlation emerged between conservatism values and sincerity, competence, sophistication and excitement, while the ethicality values showed a positive correlation in relation to the first two (Table 3). In addition to prosociality, progressive values correlated positively (albeit weakly, $p < .10$) with impressions of sincerity and competence, whereas status values did not correlate significantly with any impression. Ruggedness did not correlate with any value index. In general, people with conservative value priorities seem to perceive the organic consumer most positively.

4.5 Value-attitude-impression relationship

The analyses so far suggest – in line with the second hypothesis (H2) – that observers own values moderate the prosociality image of organic food favorer. To investigate whether organic food attitude mediates the relationship between the values and prosociality impression, a mediation analysis was performed with the ethicality and conservatism values as IVs – as they were related (at least marginally) to both organic food attitude and prosociality impression – with impression as the DV and attitude as the mediator. Multiple regression analyses were conducted first to assess each component of the proposed mediation models. The results (again) showed that the ethicality ($\beta = .26$, $t(82) = 2.54$, $p = .013$) and conservatism ($\beta = .20$, $t(82) = 2.52$, $p = .014$) values were positively associated with prosociality impression. In addition, the results (again) indicated that these same values ($\beta = .14$, $t(82) = 1.85$, $p = .068$; $\beta = .10$, $t(82) = 1.67$, $p = .099$, respectively) were positively (albeit weakly) related to organic food attitude.

Finally, the results confirmed that the mediator – organic food attitude – was positively associated with prosociality impression ($\beta=.59$, $t(82)=4.33$, $p<.001$).

Because both the a-path and b-path were (at least marginally, $p<.10$) significant, the mediation analyses were tested using the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates; the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effects was obtained with 5000 bootstrap resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results of these analyses supported the mediating role of organic food attitude in the relationship between the ethicality ($\beta=.09$; $CI=.005$ to $.22$) and conservatism ($\beta=.06$; $CI=.002$ to $.15$) values and prosociality impression. The results also indicated that the direct effect of these values on prosociality impression was substantially reduced when organic food attitude was controlled ($\beta=.18$, $t(82)=1.87$, $p=.065$; $\beta=.14$, $t(82)=1.94$, $p=.056$, respectively), thus suggesting mediation. It should be noted, however, that after controlling for organic food attitude, the relationship between the values and prosociality impression remained marginally significant ($p<.10$), which suggests partial mediation. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

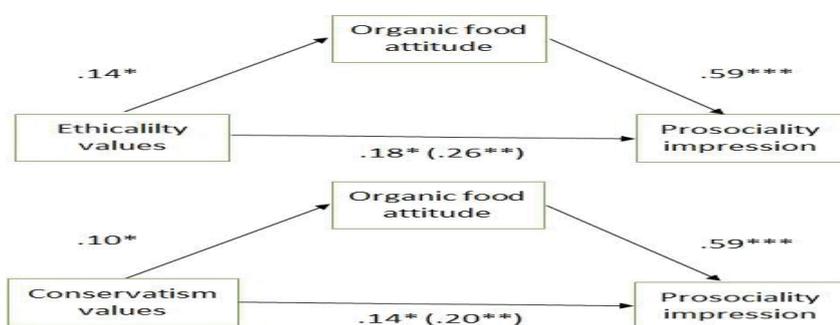


Figure 2. Indirect effects of ethicality and conservatism values on prosociality impression through organic food attitude (* $p<.10$, ** $p<.05$, *** $p<.01$).

As for Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions, some indications of partial mediation (i.e., the significance of the c-path decreased after controlling for organic food attitude, and the CIs did not include zero) were detected in the case of *competence* (ethicality and conservatism values), *sincerity* (ethicality and conservatism values) and *sophistication* (conservatism values), but not in the case of *excitement* impression. *Ruggedness* was not tested, as it did not correlate significantly with any value index.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study has produced a novel understanding of the interplay between consumers' value orientations and the symbolism encompassing organic food consumption. The results suggested first that organic consumption can confer the valuable signal of prosociality (H1). In addition, the results indicated that favoring these types of food signals also other socially valued traits, such as sophistication. Some indications also revealed that the product type of organic food may play a moderating role in evaluations of others. The most novel finding, however, concerned who makes these socially beneficial interpretations. The results suggest that people who endorse ethical and conservative values perceive the organic consumer most positively (H2); the prosociality impression was mediated by the more specific organic food attitude for both value classes, thereby forming a value-attitude-impression relationship. Next, the implications of these findings are discussed in more detail together with the limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Theoretical implications, limitations and future research suggestions

Understanding how one's value priorities are associated with the prosociality perception of organic consumers is the most intriguing aspect of this research. Yet, it is acknowledged that although the relationship between values and impressions of prosociality was strong, the corresponding relationship between values and organic food attitude was weaker (see Table 3); also the mediating

effect was only partial (see Figure 2). That is to say, more research, applying different methods, is needed before a fully accurate picture can be formed.

It was not surprising that people with high ethical values viewed the organic consumer positively. Some key prosocial features of organic food, namely, environmental benefits and animal welfare, are inseparably linked to the worldview of self-transcendent people (Aertsens et al., 2009). It is also well known that individuals have a tendency to judge the social world from the vantagepoint of their in-group (cf. Wright, Dinsmore, & Kellaris, 2013). That is, we often like people who are similar to ourselves and dislike those who expressing values other than our own. For this reason also, the perception of prosociality was quite expected. Based on these notions and current organic food consumption research – suggesting that consumers with these very value priorities are prone to make organic food purchases – however, one might assume that an ethical worldview would have created the strongest impressions of prosociality. However, people who endorsed conservative values perceived organic consumers as equally prosocial and also attached other socially valued traits to them (see Table 3).

This result was more unexpected than expected because fundamentally, according to the key postulations of the Schwartz's theory, conservatism values are linked to selfish goals based on upholding the status quo. In other words, the organic consumer could be viewed – unlike in the ethical value cluster – as a threat to the hegemonic order, thus generating a less prosocial perception (Schwartz, 2010). What, then, might be the reason for this positive interpretation (not only prosocial but also sophisticated and competent, Table 3)? People with these value priorities may believe – because many features of organic food are congruent with a conservative worldview – that organic food users are diligent and hardworking and, thus, they can afford to buy organic options. At the same time, they appear to care for the common good and welfare of others and are therefore ideal members of a stable community (cf. Allen et al., 2008).

There it still the question why self-transcendent people did not perceive the organic consumer as more prosocial than conservative people. Perhaps prosocial behavior – organic food consumption in this case – represents for them something that is automatically expected from others (i.e., witnessing it does not stir up strong consumer impressions). Another possible explanation is that people with this worldview – because they are the most frequent organic food purchasers – are well aware of the social signal value that favoring organic food can confer. In other words, they may be skeptical about the true motives of organic consumers (cf. Thøgersen, 2011). Furthermore, it has been suggested (Worsley & Lea, 2008) that people who hold strong egalitarian values (cf. self-transcendence) may be more concerned about poverty and animal welfare, since these are implicitly linked to concepts of equality. This could indicate that people who are self-transcendence oriented are perhaps more likely to value the action itself (organic consumption) than the person performing the action (organic consumer). What really is the case is left for future research to investigate.

The author encourages other researchers to examine this problem using more implicit methods (that are better able to tap into unconscious processes) than in this study. The explicit method of inquiry is one of the limitations of this paper. Priming (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014) and neuroscience (Plassmann, Ramsøy, & Milosavljevic, 2012), for example, provides a potential method for exploring unconscious consumer behavior. In the food realm, applying more objective methods is especially relevant because the majority of food and eating-related behaviors have been suggested to occur automatically based on intuitive reasoning (Köster, 2009). In addition, other prosocial products, such as fair trade (Coppola et al., 2017) and local (Memery et al., 2015) food, should not be ignored when studying the dynamics between values, attitudes and socially valued traits.

The key conceptual limitation of the study is that altruistic behavior (in relation to prosociality) was approached rather straightforwardly. It was roughly assumed that altruistic behavior can either be pure or to some extent motivated by selfish reasons. In reality, the case is not that simple. Clavien and Klein (2010, pp. 267–269), for instance, suggest in their paper that three main debates can be distinguished in which the term altruism is approached in distinct senses. *Biological altruism* asks: “how acts that increase the fitness of other organisms at a cost of own fitness, can go hand in hand with evolution”? It is measured in terms of reproductive success. *Behavioral altruism* wonders: “why we often fail to behave in the way predicted by the neoclassical model of human agency often used in economics”. It is defined in terms of individual costs and benefits at the end of one or a series of social actions.

The concept of *psychological altruism*, in turn, deals with the motives of altruistic behavior (primary and instrumental), while the aforementioned two focus on its outcomes (i.e., a type of “cost-benefit-analysis”). Specifically, it is view according to which at least some of our actions are motivated by altruistic primary motives (cf. pure altruism). Psychological egoism, in turn, rejects this view: accordingly, all acts of human beings are always to some extent motivated by personal benefit expectations (hedonistic rewards, resources, reputation, etc.). In short, debate of the notions of altruism is rich and nothing but unanimous (see Clavien & Klein, 2010). Future studies on prosocial consumption are highly encouraged to take these insights into account with care when producing understanding of this theme. From a practical point of view, and in contrast with the current study, measuring distinct and competing motivations for organic food-related prosocial behavior might be a way to get deeper to the realm of altruism-driven behaviors.

Although organic foods are typically (in the case of most product types) perceived as tastier – and also healthier and more environmentally friendly, see Ellison et al., 2016 – than their conventional counterparts, a few exceptions exist; organic vice foods (e.g., sodas and cookies), for example, are often perceived as less tasty (Van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2011). Additionally, in the present study, prosociality (and some other measured impressions) was not always associated with the four organic food products to exactly the same degree (see Table 1, cases of yogurt & bacon vs. ketchup & butter), although the pattern was similar and the organic information did not interact with the product type. For this reason, organic options with different symbolic content should be studied in more depth. Organic alcohol, chocolate and more upscale products (e.g., special cooking oils) provide viable examples for research subjects.

It cannot be ignored that all the study participants lived in the metropolitan area of Helsinki (see also Footnote 1). This approach can be delimiting, as Puska et al. (2016) showed that even within the same Western and culturally homogeneous country, there may be variation in how organic food consumption is viewed. Thus, before generalizing the findings, the study should be replicated in a socio-culturally distinct area (e.g., countryside) so that a more holistic picture can be formed. In addition to Schwartz’s value orientations, other possible moderators of the consumer image cannot be overlooked. Other psychological characteristics (e.g., narcissism – Naderi & Strutton, 2015), more specific environmental attitudes and political identity (cf. Brick, Sherman, & Kim, 2017) represent potential additional candidates for moderators.

As the results suggest that organic food consumption is capable of signaling desirable traits – and is also relatively inexpensive and thus available for many Western consumers – a question arises regarding the extent to which organic foods are favored for motives other than the often self-reported and socially approved reasons of superior taste, healthiness, food safety, animal welfare and environmental benefits (Hemmerling et al., 2015). The consumer segment that considers reputation management to be an important choice criterion may be substantial (cf. Delgado et al., 2015). Consequently, future studies are encouraged to take socially disapproved motives into account more strongly when investigating organic food consumption or prosocial behavior more broadly. Furthermore, because in many Western countries – and particularly in the Scandinavia – openly status-motivated acts are associated strongly with certain moral reservations (see Sortheix & Lönnqvist, 2014), it is imperative that primarily indirect research methods (e.g., priming) are applied.

5.2 Practical implications

It is well known that due to their high price, consumers do not purchase organic foods very often, even though the self-reported attitudes toward them are usually positive (Marian et al., 2014, p. 52). The current study revealed that favoring these foods also elicited some impressions associated with traditional high status, such as sophistication – in line with “sustainable luxury” considerations (Cervellon & Shammas, 2013). Consequently, making reputational aspects more salient in the sales environment (e.g., clues capable of activating consumers’ status motives and more visible selling locations) might be a potential starting point of efforts to boost the sales of organic foods despite the high price (cf. Brick et al., 2017, p. 227; Rana & Paul, 2017). Furthermore, retailers could try to strengthen this idea by placing subtle “watching eyes” in these food sections. It has been suggested that prosocial choices increase when consumers sense that they are being observed by others (see Pfattheicher & Keller, 2015). How these elements interact (i.e., status clues and more visible selling

locations together with the feeling of being monitored in relation to preferring organic food) is an idea worth testing in the retail environment (in particular due to its cost friendliness).

Marketers of organic food products are also encouraged to develop conspicuous solutions (green shopping bags, stickers, competitions in social media, etc.) so that consumers have a better opportunity to signal their prosocial tendencies or other socially valued characteristics to others (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2016). In fact, already when consumers are shopping, they should be persuaded (e.g., orally by the store personnel or via carefully planned and placed advertisement texts) to take these shopping bags with them when next time coming to the store. Namely, it is known that purchases of not only environmentally friendly organic foods but also indulgent foods can increase, if it is possible to bring your own shopping bag (see Karmarkar & Bollinger, 2015).

On a more general level with regard to the image positioning of stores selling mainly organic products, a transition toward “trendiness” and “luxurious” might be a promising direction – in order to trigger more effectively prosocial status signaling behaviors (cf. Van der Wal et al., 2016). If this is the positioning chosen, then marketers are encouraged to refrain from excessive price-cuts and oversupply as they can mitigate the social signaling value of their offerings. In fact – counterintuitively – among some consumer segments, organic food options might be seen as more desirable if their price is relative high and the availability is more limited (cf. Griskevicius et al., 2010).

Based on the results, one cannot avoid the idea that those who hold conservative values might be a potential consumer segment for organic foods. Some indications that this value base can go hand in hand with organic food choices have been found in other studies as well (e.g., Thøgersen et al., 2016). Consequently, marketers should create creative solutions so that this segment’s positive attitudes relating to organic food consumption can be converted into purchase behavior. To illustrate, the first step is to identify those consumers who hold a conservative worldview (e.g., by conducting careful customer data analysis). Then, organic foods should be promoted to them (e.g., by tailored e-mail campaigns) primarily through healthiness and food safety because they are features appreciated by conservative people. In contrast, ethical or hedonistic aspects should not be highlighted as strongly because they represent less important symbolism to this segment. Retailers could follow the same basic idea (i.e., emphasizing the former and avoiding the latter) in stores located in areas, where conservative values are generally believed to be cherished (e.g., rural areas).

Finally, it cannot be overemphasized that by favoring organic food, one can obtain a prosocial, altruistic reputation. Designers of societal intervention campaigns and policy makers should strongly emphasize this insight in their efforts to move consumers toward more sustainable food choices. Motivating people with a “nice guy” reputation could be a more effective means to achieve this behavior than a factual lecture about the precarious state of the environment (cf. Lehner, Mont, & Heiskanen, 2016).

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Appendix. Example of food product photos used in study (organic on left, conventional on right).