

## 7 Tactical consumers:

### The re-appropriation of organic food labels in everyday practices

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*The logic of consumption [...], can be defined as a manipulation of signs.  
(Baudrillard, 1998, p.114-15).*

### Everyday practices – realities of consumption

It is a vast array of product choices that presents itself to consumers every day. Consumers therefore need to develop criteria on which they can base their decisions. Such criteria are in turn influenced by many circumstances, amongst these the information received and processed by the shoppers. One aspect of such information, addressed towards the consumer, is the labelling of organic food. Displayed on the package of products that are found in the shelves of supermarkets and organic food stores, these labels are meant to function as guides of organic and thus more ethical, righteous or environmentally friendly purchase in the jungle of choices of products provided. But how do consumers really perceive these labels? This question has increased in relevance in recent time, both for researchers interested in ethical and political consumption, but also for the consumers themselves. It is them who are making and are (indirectly) asked to make the relevant decisions in their everyday practices of shopping. Their individual reflections on labelled and unlabelled organic foodstuffs are therefore of special interest to the analysis of contemporary consumption.

This volume has already covered some of the most important issues on ecological and organic labelling schemes, their history (Savadkouhi, 2011), how they were established and incorporated (Gall & Wörner, 2011) and also the aspects of their social construction (Münch, 2011; Kirchoff & Richter, 2011). Apart from that, a vast literature on ethical consumption practices with studies from the fields of marketing, business and sociology is available. Most of them aim at an identification of consumer choice behaviour with regard to organic produce (e.g. McEachern & McClean, 2002; Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008;

Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006). Due to the fact that most research so far has worked with quantitative empirical findings, merely tendencies and trends in consumption patterns have been analysed in these cases, whereas underlying attitudes and motives did remain elusive (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008, p.167). Statistical data does not further our understanding of the actual factors underpinning individual shopping practices (De Certeau, 1984, p.34). Furthermore, it does not reveal any insights into the process of how individuals give meaning to products and how the idea of ethical consumption is defined by the consumers themselves (Spaargaren, 2000, p.57).

In summary, what has not been paid enough attention to so far is the study of the individual consumers who are addressed with labelled organic products. What do consumers do with the information given to them? Are labels trusted, used and paid attention to? More clearly, the question must be asked: how do consumers give meaning to the labels and appropriate them into their daily shopping decisions? In this chapter I aim to address the above mentioned research questions on the consumer side of labelling as a complement to this book. Due to the fact that grocery shopping is the kind of purchase that consumers engage in most often – many people do it almost daily – I chose this particular shopping activity as a focus of my research. The labels referred to in the following are thus organic labels of foodstuff.

For the empirical part of my study, I employed the methodology of qualitative semi-structured interviewing as described by Seale (2004, pp.179-91). This implies that the twenty interviews, which I conducted, had an open conversational structure, with no fixed set of questions being asked. However, I used a topic guide in order to receive comparable results (ibid, p.212). Conversations commenced with questions about the knowledge and purchase of, and opinion on, labelled organic produce. In most cases, this resulted in a broad elaboration on the respondents' attitudes and a wide discussion of any related topics deemed relevant by the consumer.

The interviewees were chosen in different ways: some belong to a convenience sample (Rohall, Milkie & Lucas, 2011, p.58) of friends and acquaintances, others can be categorised as belonging to a random sample (ibid) of people I recruited in the shopping streets of the cities of Aachen and Mannheim, or met in the train travelling between the two destinations. Overall, most interviews were conducted with German middle class consumers from the region of South-West Germany. Furthermore, most of them can be classified as non-intensive organic food shoppers. I want to state explicitly that this limitation to a certain area, coupled with the relative small number of twenty interviewees, chosen for my specific approach, implies a limited validity for the generalisation of my findings. But such generalisation has not been attempted by this study, which has more

of an exploratory character aiming at an understanding of very individual attitudes, motives and behaviours (Seale, 2004, p.182). It thus follows the line of studies aimed at the exploration of the meanings attached to individual behaviour (e.g. Shaw et al. 2006; see also Blumer 1969 on social constructivism).

The viewpoint and methodology adapted throughout the chapter is aligned to the sociology of consumption of Michel de Certeau (1984). In 'The Practice of Everyday Life' he lays out his theory of individual consumer *tactics*. Furthermore he points to the fact that these individual practices with their *tactical* character cannot be grasped by statistics. Statistical studies can give insights into trends, homogeneity and the material of the consumer's practices, but not their individual "ways of operating" (pp. xi-xix; p.34). In addition, individual paths of information perception, decision making, the choices and uses of products must be looked at in more detail (p.xix). Furthermore, an analysis of the use and understanding of signs, images and language is needed (p.xviii). Through such kind of analysis the study aims to reveal the ways in which organic products are perceived, appropriated and used by ordinary people in their daily shopping praxis.

The chapter will start with a review of the sustainability debate and some relevant theories of the sociology of consumption. Secondly, the theory of de Certeau will be laid out. It serves as the main viewpoint on consumerism that I will adopt throughout the chapter. I will then discuss the results of my own empirical research. These will be connected to the aforementioned literature, as well as sociological and behavioural theory. Furthermore, the results have been grouped into four relevant topics: the perception of organic food labels, ethical identity formation, local food shopping and food safety. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for a better understanding of consumer behaviour in the context of organic food consumption, especially in relation to labelling schemes and the common notions of political and ethical consumerism as well as consumer empowerment (Shaw et al., 2006).

## An introduction to consumerism: environmental, ethical and political dimensions

Consumption has mainly been the concern of economists, market analysts and behavioural scientists for a long time (Babutsidze, 2007). But in recent decades the topic has found its way into the social sciences and thereby developed to become a much discussed research field (ibid, p.4ff). Prominent examples are Miller's examination of the emergence of mass consumption and the department store (1981) and Bourdieu's treatise

on class divide as determinant for consumer behaviour (1984). Also Baudrillard's (1998) 'The Consumer Society: Myth and Structures' can be named one of the basic works in the sociology of consumption. The aforementioned examples point to a crucial facet of consumer sociology: its scrutiny of "consumerism" as a social activity that does not stand on its own but is embedded in the wider cultural context of the public sphere of life. Therefore, the sociology of consumption includes the public discourses that are relevant for consumerism into its analysis (Spaargaren, Mol and Buttel, 2000, p.9).

Since the 1970s, the most important discourse that entered the public sphere and shaped the way consumption and production are perceived nowadays, especially from the sociological perspective, is the debate on ecological modernisation (Spaargaren et al., 2000, p.8). The first phase of the debate centres on de-modernisation theories, initiated by the publication of the report of the Club of Rome, *Limits to Growth* (Meadows D.H., Meadows D.L., Rahnders & Behrens, 1972). In their work the authors relate the exponential growth of the world's population to the finite sustaining capacities of the global ecological system. With the prediction of limited resources running out soon, together with a collapse of the environment if continuously exploited, they indirectly suggested a stop to current ways of consumption, initiating the radical discourse of survivalism (Dryzak, 2005, p.25). A few years later the Brundtland Commission issued the report *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987). It provided substantial grounds for a more reform-oriented debate centred on possible solutions to the problems Meadows et al. had been pointing at and started a new phase with an emphasis on sustainable development (Dresner, 2002, p.1). The concept is famously defined by the Commission as:

[...] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs (UN WECD, 1987, ch.1, point 49).

Having found its way into the public sphere, the discussion created a growing awareness of environmental and social consequences of capitalist economy as well as the impacts of Western consumerism on the global ecological and social system (Johnston, 2008, p.262). Furthermore, as Spaargaren notes, the debate initiated a restructuring of the economic order in the sense that, "[i]t also implied a redefining of the role of the state vis-à-vis civil society, with both market actors and environmental movements redefining their former roles" (Spaargaren, 2000, p.56).

In the 1980s the ecological modernisation debate was tackled through the state by environmental policies targeting institutional actors (ibid, p.56). One of the policy tools implemented was the establishment of labelling schemes, which aim at an approval of ecological production methods. One of the earliest examples was the 'Blue Angel' (*Der Blaue Engel*), which was founded in 1978 in Germany (see Chapter 1, Savadkouhi). It represents a so called eco label, primarily addressed the manufacturing of household products such as paper, cleaning devices and eco friendly electronics (see Chapter 3, Kirchhoff and Richter, 2011). In the 1990s a change occurred towards an increasingly producer led incentive towards sustainability with the emergence of an increasing number of "green" product lines in all sectors. Especially the food industry underwent significant changes due to a new tendency for retailer led governance. This turn was especially observable with retailers in the United Kingdom, which started to offer organic product lines of their own private labels (Marsden, Flynn and Harrison, 2000, p. 73ff). With a growing number of state owned and private labelling schemes the organic food sector is now a constantly expanding business sector across the globe (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008, p.163).

On the side of consumption, two reactions developed out of the above mentioned discourse on ecological modernisation and sustainability: the radical standpoint of ecologism (survivalism), which called for a stop to contemporary mass consumerism (Dryzak, 2005, p.15). Secondly, an ameliorative approach, which focuses on conscious ways of consumption with an eye on matters of sustainability (Gabriel and Lang, 1995, p.23; Johnston, 2008, p. 238). This demand on individual actors to integrate the rationales of sustainable development into their daily shopping decisions leads to the conceptualisation of citizen consumers (Micheletti, 2001, p.12; Spaargaren, 2000, p.56). The citizen consumer can express the social and environmental concerns that impact them as citizens, while sustaining a commitment to a consumer ideology based on perpetual economic growth and sovereign consumer choice without having to limit himself drastically (Johnston, 2008, p. 263).

The emphasis on free choice has led to the conception of consumer empowerment (e.g. Shaw, Newholm & Dickinson, 2006), political consumerism (Micheletti, 2001) and ethical consumption (Johnston, 2008; McEachern & McClean, 2002) within the sociology of consumption. Consumer empowerment, as Shaw et al. explain, "is manifested in attempts to redistribute the power between consumer and supplier" in the way that consumers willingly exert influence on the market through selective purchase of products (p.1050). This phenomenon of selective consumption has been termed *buycott*. In the view of Michele Micheletti (2001), it constitutes a tool for the expression of political opinion (p.50). The author claims, that deliberate *buycotts*, but also stronger forms of consumer

actions such as public boycotts and participation in consumer activist groups, transform consumption into a venue for political participation (p12). In this way, consumption or its conscious avoidance in relation to distinct products becomes a tool for individuals to express their concerns and disagreements with the current capitalist economy and economic political directions in the way that they regulate the market by mechanisms of demand and supply.

The term of the ethical consumer refers to those in the market that show a strong concern for social values of justice (Johnston, 2008, p.12). These people may consider sustainability of the environment or display anti-corporate attitudes, such as going against the maltreatment of animals in mass production sides (ibid, p.238; McEachern & McClean, 2002, p.86). They do so in their everyday shopping, particularly while shopping for food. As Johnston explains:

Although ethical consumption activism has taken on multiple targets, food has been central to the struggle. Food shopping is not simply a banal, private concern, but represents a key private/public nexus, as well as a potential entry-point to political engagement. This understanding draws from feminist understanding of social reproduction, which emphasise that food choices are not neutral, private matters, but rather represent a politicised, gendered, and globalised terrain where gendered labour and households intersect with states, capital, and civil society in varying balances (Johnston, 2008, p.239).

It is exactly this private/public nexus, the intersection between household and public sphere that lends consumption, and especially the daily shopping for groceries its political dimension. Johnston uses the term “citizen consumer hybrid” to describe the phenomenon of the consumer who through conscious choice of products can enact a political opinion and at the same time satisfy his own needs (ibid, p.229). By carefully choosing the way they consume by the choice of products, but also of consumption sides, individuals can demonstrate their ethical attitudes and social commitment, while still serving their own interests and restrain themselves only in some respect (p.263). Such citizen-consumer behaviour can be realised, for example in the form of supporting small shops and farmers instead of buying at the discounter or by choosing fair-trade products instead of conventional alternatives (p.260; Varul, 2009).

However, Johnston is critical of the concept and points to inherent tensions in the concept and its manifestation in branding strategies of corporations which suggest that there is some moral regulation acting on the marketplace. He criticises:

The notion of consumers “voting with their dollars” has obvious populist appeal. As buying guides frequently remind shoppers, every shopping decision is an opportunity to cast a vote. But do the transformative aspirations of ethical consumption activism enable transformative outcomes, particularly when they are taken up by corporations? (Johnston, 2008, p.240)

The rhetorical question posed in the end clearly shows Johnston’s scepticism towards the effect that a supposedly ‘ethical consumption’ of products of organic labels might have. He especially points to the fact that such labels are often merely used as marketing strategies of supermarkets, such as the Whole Food Market he examines in his case study.

Despite such insecurities about the purpose and effect of organic labels, some consumers are consciously politically active or have political intentions while shopping. But not all consumers who buy organic food are. There might be other motives for them to engage in certain consumption patterns such as the purchase of organic foods (Zapeda & Deal, 2009, p.697). In acknowledgement of this fact, Micheletti distinguishes between *private and public virtue traditions* when talking about politically oriented consumption. Those political consumers following the public virtue tradition are characterised as “public-oriented citizen-consumers [who] practice their public principles in everyday settings and actions that are not conventionally conceived as political in orientation” (p.19). These consumers choose their products according to political, ethical and social criteria. They engage in a personal boycott of some products, inform themselves about the politics of those products they aim to choose and follow labelling schemes that help them to choose those products they approve as righteous, ethical and politically correct purchase. According to Micheletti, by means of these alternative choices, those consumers use “exit, voice, and loyalty” in order to express a political opinion and do so for altruistic reasons directed to the social public (p.16).

In the second case, the *private virtue tradition* of politics, consumers are driven by egoistic motives in their choice for alternative product lines (p.20). Private concerns can range from a certain illness of a family member, such as neurodermatitis or food intolerances, to quality concerns and the aim to go for the healthiest option. As Micheletti points out, it is important to admit that “...[s]elf-interest can play a constructive role in democratic political development” (p.21). Although the motivation varies, the choice of product may still be the same as in the case of a public virtue oriented shopper; in both cases the consumers deliberately avoid conventional produce, while acting upon the politics of the products they choose (pp.20-24). It is therefore a way of “voting with their dollar”, voting for or against certain production methods, corporate hegemonies or social injustices of trade (Johnston 2008, p.229).

Micheletti connects this new form of political engagement with broader political and social changes in Western societies, such as the emergence of sub-politics connected to “new ways of political identity formation” (pp.31-32). In this context, the growing trend of individualisation, as observed by Ulrich Beck (1991), also plays a role. It concerns a move away from a society with rigid class distinctions, a process that opens new ways of and possibilities for identity building (Micheletti, 2001, p.30ff; Beck, 1991). In the context of the public debate on ecological modernisation and sustainability, one such identity might be that of the ethical, politically oriented consumer, who consciously buys certain products and avoids others, goes to distinct shopping spaces and leaves out conventional ones, all that with having in mind certain attitudes, motives or private or public interest and intentions.

The question arises whether such theorising about consumer activism as outlined above, is commensurate to the actual reality of every day practices of consumers. Do consumers really engage in some form of public virtue tradition politics while shopping or are they mainly driven by egoistic motivations such as needs and desires or seduced and guided in their choices by the images of the media (Spaargaren, 2000, p.57; )?

## Two ways of operating: of strategies and tactics, writing and reading

As unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the “wandering lines” (“lignes d’erre”) drawn by the autistic children studied by F. Deligny (17): “indirect” or “errant” trajectories obeying their own logic... (Certeau, 1984, p.xvii)

In his treatise ‘The Practice of Everyday Life’, Michel de Certeau (1984) sketches a picture of the consumer that differs from that employed in mainstream literature. De Certeau acknowledges the great number of studies on the organisation of contemporary society and consumer behaviour (p.xii). But he advises us to go further in our analysis of the phenomenon of consumption in a way that acknowledges the ways in which people in their every day practices *make use* of the social spaces in which they operate, be it the cities, the supermarket or spaces of social interaction (ibid, emphasis mine). By an examination of these uses he aims to reject the common notion of the consumer as passive absorber, guided and seduced by ‘established rules’ (p.xi). Instead, consumption is according to de Certeau:

[...]devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (pp. xii-xiii)

In order to understand these activities, the author stresses the importance of including a survey of images and language, conveyed to the people through public media into an analysis of (consumer) society (pp.xii - xxiii). This study in turn has to be amended by a closer look at what the consumer of these images and words does with them, how he makes sense of them and how he incorporates them into his action repertoires in his very individual way (p.31). Consumers are no homogenous mass that can be classified, put into boxes and analysed alongside stringent categories (p.xvii). Consumers are individuals, who in their daily shopping practices engage in an art of re-appropriation of the information and stimulations given to them by their environment (p.xiii). According to de Certeau, the consumer must be seen as an artist, who skilfully, witty and artistically creates his own paths through the jungle of everyday worlds.

De Certeau describes their ways of operating as movements through space and time, like trajectories (p.xviii). But he gets the impression that the notion of the trajectory is misleading and it fixes user action to something that can be drawn as a red line through space, which would be a wrong assumption (ibid). So instead, and for the sake of a better description of what is happening out there in the world of consumption, he introduces the notions of “strategies” and “tactics” (p.xix). These notions standing for somewhat opposing action repertoires can be analysed in two ways: firstly, by the use of the discipline of rhetoric, which distinguishes them as two ways of practicing language, which are the acts of writing and reading or in other words seducing, persuading and making use of it (pp.xx). Secondly, de Certeau emphasises their difference with relation to their use of social spaces:

But what distinguishes them at the same time concerns the types of operations and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces. (p. 30)

A strategy is therefore an act of organisation, of management and a rationalisation of the outer environment that it deals with. Political, martial or scientific attempts to gain power of the world through ways of organising are to be seen as strategies. Their counterpart

concerning action repertoires, the tactics of users, are calculations within the predefined terrain of strategic laws, regulations and languages. They are dependent on time insofar as they must use the opportunity, seize the moment and skilfully use the predefined spaces, controlled by another power, for their own sake (p.xix). Such tactics are apparent in the everyday practices of people and consumers:

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many “ways of operating”: victories of the “weak” over the “strong” (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, “hunter’s cunning,” maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike. (ibid)

The consumer’s witty, sometimes spontaneous, more often habitual tactics, their dealing with consumption spaces, products and information must therefore be the focus of a study of individual consumers. Only then can we grasp an understanding of the real motives, attitudes and behaviour of individuals without seeing them as fixed entities but rather as momentous influences that act upon those engaged in consumption practices.

This outlook on consumption and the strategic use of signs and language as it is led out by de Certeau, contributes to an understanding of ways of information processing and use by every day actors. I will employ his insights for an analysis of my own empirical findings in relation to the re-appropriation of organic food labels by individual consumers in their daily food shopping practices. I will analyse these labels and the labelling schemes that stand behind them as strategies. They are strategies of an economic order imposed on the market and created by rules and regulations, but they are tactically used by consumers in their own specific ways, which may circumvent and manipulate the rigid character of these rules.

## Labelling schemes: written strategies, symbols and obscurity

Reading is only one aspect of consumption, but a fundamental one. In a society that is increasingly written, organized by the power of modifying things and of reforming structures on the basis of scriptural models (whether scientific, economic, or political), transformed little by little into combined “texts” (be they administrative, urban, industrial, etc.), the binominal set production – consumption can often be replaced by its general equivalent and indicator, the binominal set writing – reading. (De Certeau, 1984, p.167)

A great number and variety of food labels are to be found in stores and supermarkets. These can be labels that indicate the nutritious value of the product, eco labels that assure an environmentally friendly production, or organic food labels. The later ones may stand for alternative agricultural methods, animal welfare or may as well incorporate ecological criteria. The focus of this research has been set on organic food labels, which are available on the German market. These include a great number of labels, of which more than thirty are organic quality assurance labels, about fifteen can be categorised as general quality assurance labels, partly certifying organic methods, six are trade labels, such as fair trade. Additionally, there are ten labels for regional products (label-online.de, 2011, ‘*Labeldatenbank*’). The different labels all stem from diverse forms of labelling schemes, some are privately owned labels of supermarket branches (e.g. REWE Bio), some belong to organic agriculture corporations (such as Demeter or Bioland) and some are state owned labelling schemes, such as the German Bio Siegel. In addition there is an EU wide label for organic food, which has been established in 2010 and guarantees the same standards as the German Bio Siegel (biobay.de, EU Bio Logo, 2011).

This listing clarifies that behind each label stands a certain system of principles, control schemes and policies, sometimes even a whole philosophy, as in the case of Demeter, the oldest German organic food label, established in 1928. Despite their inherent differences, all labelling schemes have one common goal: to ensure that the distinction between organic and high quality, non organic, conventional foods is visible for consumers. The label stands as a signifier for certain guidelines of production and is put on the product in order to make these regulatory frames visible to the shopper. Thus, these labels have been implemented in order to reveal a part of the product’s politics to the consumer, which he can agree with or not by choosing to purchase these products or by refraining to do so (Micheletti, 2001, p.51). By doing so, they enable an empowerment of the consumer who is “free to make the choices as he sees fit” (Marsden, Flynn and Harrison, 2000, p.48, Koerber

and Kretschmer, 2001, p.279). The best example in this case is probably the fair trade label, with its politics of social justice, which guarantees appropriate loans, the prohibition of child labour and a fair distribution of means in trade between the global north and the south (Johnston, 2008, p.241; biobay, Fairtrade, 2011).

In view of the vast number of labels available on the German market with a trend towards growing numbers of internal privately owned labels of supermarket branches and discounters, (Marsden, Flynn and Harrison, 2000, p.73ff, McEachern and Warnaby, 2008, p.414) the question remains to be answered how ordinary consumers react to the signal of the label if they see it in the supermarket. In the style of de Certeau, we could also ask: how do consumers act upon the labelling schemes that present themselves as *strategies* of the state and the supermarket corporation? I regard de Certeau's term of the strategy as suitable here in order to describe food labels, due to the fact that their aim is to control the consumer in a certain way by guiding his choices. Secondly, labels are strategies because they are based upon an entire apparatus of rules and regulations, which is in turn guided by economic and political laws. Finally, labels are information laden images written on the products and leaflets of stores, which aim to convey a certain message to the consumer by the use of strategic language used in science and economy.

I want to investigate the question, what consumers make of this information in the form of pictures and scriptures given to them. How do they read the strategies laid down in front of them and re-appropriate them into their *tactics* of everyday consumption?

In order to answer this matter, I conducted several qualitative interviews. In the beginning of the interviews, the interviewees were shown a list of the most common organic labels used on the German market. They were asked if they recognised any of the labels and whether they had bought products identified with these labels. The list contained of nine labels displayed in the following order<sup>127</sup>: Bio Siegel, EU Bio Logo,

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127 The list was taken from the article "Bio Report"; in the journal *eat smarter*, pp.18-23. The labels mentioned on the list stand in abbreviated form for the following guidelines of production:

1. Bio Siegel and EU Bio Logo: both stand for the EU Standard of organic production and are often displayed in addition to many supermarket owned labels, they are a standard requirements for any other organic food label.
2. Bioland: biggest cooperation of organic agricultural in Germany with stricter rules than the EU standard.
3. Demeter: biological-dynamic production according to the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner.
4. Naturland: various standards including ecological production and social justice.
5. Biokreis: marketing of regional products.
6. Biopark: organic agriculture in conservation areas.
7. GÄA e.V.: former East German cooperation of organic agriculture.
8. Neuland: mainly species appropriate animal treatment.

Bioland, Demeter, Naturland, Biokreis, Biopark, GÄA E.V. and Neuland (eat smarter, 'Bio Report', March 2011). The first state owned Bio Siegel appeared to be well known to all interviewees, with one respondent commenting that "you see that one everywhere now". About five respondents recognised three to four of the labels, in most cases the Bio Siegel, Demeter and Bioland; sometimes the EU label was also familiar. Only two respondents knew more than four of the presented certificates. Secondly, I asked for labelled products purchased and the location of purchase. Most interviewees said that they had seen and bought them in the supermarket or discounter that they frequently visit, such as Edeka, Rewe or Aldi (German supermarket chains, L.W.). Only very few respondents had been to a specific organic (food) store and had bought their products there. This reveals an important insight; that most of the consumers who have been questioned in this study did not belong to the category of so called 'frequent organic buyers' (Zapeda & Deal, 2009, p.698), but instead engaged in the purchase of organic products infrequently and, as we will see, often based on *ad hoc* decisions and for various motivations.

Subsequently, interviewees were questioned as to whether they pay attention to organic food labels in their purchase decisions. Thereafter, I inquired as to whether they trust these certificates and their motivations for doing so. A majority of the respondents immediately started to complain about the confusions created by the high number of labelling schemes and the lack of information regarding them. Many noted that they did not know what the labels actually represent in terms of the production criteria that they are supposed to guarantee. One young man justified his reasons as to why he often did not choose the organic option of some products, as a result of the confusion arising from multiple labelling:

I think that the labels represent different standards. The framework requirements are not comparable. For one product it might be more important to look at this or that, for the other it might be irrelevant. But I can maybe not judge that at all, I just built my own opinion on that. One really needs to see what kind of organic product is that and what label. But there are in fact thousands....

He reveals that due to the fact that he does not have enough information on the distinct labelling schemes and their advantages in comparison with conventional products, he feels unable to judge which would be the better choice. Many interviewees voiced demands for a clearer labelling system, which they would better understand. One interviewee proposed:

One does not know what it exactly means. There is a product with an organic label, but what does that mean then? Free range eggs or so... It would be good if there was one label only, that would be regulated on a national or European level, to make it more clearly laid out.

His statement shows that he had no knowledge about the fact that the Bio Siegel represents EU wide standards and that an EU label exists at all. Many respondents showed a similar lack of knowledge concerning the existence and detailed criteria of organic food labels. This ignorance of the production criteria behind the distinct labels causes a general mistrust voiced against organic foodstuff available in conventional supermarkets, as reflected in the answer of one woman:

I also buy organic products in the supermarket, but I am never sure there, whether this is really organic. I think that in the supermarkets there are again other standards and guidelines are not as strict.

Similar scepticism is apparent in the answer of another interview partner:

There is also Bio available in the discounter, but then we are again talking about these labels. I don't know what I am supposed to think about them. Well, if there would be uniform standards...But because they are not there I do not really have a high opinion on these labels.

On the other hand, many respondents indicated that they were not willing to invest much time and effort into information gathering concerning the labels' standards. When I asked a young man whether he would look up information about labelling schemes on the Internet, he answered: "No, I am a person who does not care enough about his diet". The choice of food is apparently not a priority in his life, which leads to a disinterest in details of foodstuff. Another factor might be that such engagement simply does not fit into the everyday practicality of food shopping, as one young man told me:

Well on the other hand, what do I want actually? I go shopping and maybe buy myself a pack of sausages. But then I do not want to read an instruction manual of ten pages, about how the sausages were produced. It is not of interest to me and I do not want to bother myself with it.

What this statement makes clear, albeit in a very drastic way, due to the language that this respondent employs, is the reluctance of consumers to engage in time consuming practices of information gathering. As McEachern and Warnaby (2008) note, the cost of acquiring adequate information is perceived as much higher than the value of the product and therefore not engaged in (p.421). Furthermore, the study of labelling scheme descriptions on home pages of producers or the intensive reading of retailer leaflets are activities that do not fit into the everyday routines of consumers, whose consumption is geared towards practicality and the satisfaction of daily needs.

This leads me to the remarkable observation that despite the lack of information and the reluctance to gather it, many interviewees reported that they nevertheless bought products with organic labels. The most prominent reason named for these actions was to feel better about ones purchase:

Well, yes, I know that one cannot trust them (the labels, L.W.), but following my feeling I would decide after that criteria.

As the statement by this respondent exemplifies, labelled products were often bought due to the fact that consumers attach a 'better feeling' to the purchase of this choice. This component of having a better 'feeling' may relate to aspects of healthiness, social justice in production or animal welfare, as the answer of one elderly lady shows:

I am not a big BIO buyer. I shop a lot at the Lidl (cheap German supermarket chain, L.W.), and then I buy the organic products that are available there, well at least the eggs. I hope a little bit, that what stands behind it is adequate animal housing.

The above statements make it clear that people overcome their scepticism by telling themselves that it is nevertheless the 'better' option and that there must be good standards behind the label, although they have no knowledge of them. But this ignorance is omitted in the tactic of everyday consumption. Here, only the quick purchase of quality food is important to the consumer. This is why despite his lack of detailed knowledge of labelling schemes he takes the label as assurance of such quality.

This makes us also reconsider the scepticism that the respondents voiced: it is possible that they engaged in a kind of 'front stage' management of their identities (Rohall et al. 2011, p.130; Goffman, 1959) in the way that they aimed to convey to me the impression that I was talking to reflexive, thoughtful citizens who do not buy everything that the media tells them (de Certeau, 1984, p.187-88). In the following section, I will discuss the

phenomena of identity building and lifestyle in relation to ethical consumption which might account for some of the sceptical voices raised against some of the organic food labels.

## Walking between worlds: ethical consumption, lifestyle and self identity

The purchase of organic foodstuff can also be part of a certain conscious or ethical lifestyle. Lifestyle research (*Lebensstil Forschung*) is a field of sociology that has been used for market and target group analysis and the study of social transition processes in general. It has been initiated in the 1980s in Germany by the sociology of Ulrich Beck (Risk Society, 1986) whose conception of tendencies of individualisation (*Individualisierungstendenzen*) was based upon the observation that previously held social structures, which divided society into classes by objective criteria of income and job positions were no longer applicable to current societies (Empacher, 2003, p.1). In Beck's own words the structural changes in society occurred in the following manner:

In this "individualization process", people fall out of the nest of binding and guiding traditions, "set free", in Marx's term, from the limits and securities of class cultures and traditional milieus; they are thus confronted with themselves as the pivots and hinges of their own lives. (Beck 1991, p.40)

Dissolved from the old class structures, people engage in new forms of identity building and lifestyle formations. Due to the importance of consumption in our present societies and the decisive role that this action plays in the process of identity formation, (Bourdieu, 1984) lifestyle research is a welcomed tool for target group modelling in the field of consumer studies (Empacher, 2003, p.2).

Indeed, many of the respondents attempted to define their social and consumer identities when they talked about their shopping behaviour. Very often they made use of categorisations in order to define others, thereby engaging in a process called social categorisation (Rohall et al., 2011, p.135). By describing others people deliberately, they set themselves apart from these "other groups" of consumers and their shopping. I asked one of my interviewees why he did not go to the small biological store in his hometown. With his answer containing a description of the presumed attitude and expectations of others towards the food they buy and eat, he deliberately set himself apart, declaring that he has no such demands:

It is like a religion for these people. They want to keep their bodies in good health, live long. These people have certain expectations towards food, which I for example do not have. [...] The Abraxas (name of the organic store, L.W.) is like a pharmacy, there is also a lot of show. But it is a good thing and there are people who consciously decide to spend more on food, like others on cars or arts.

Another man told me about his brother, a frequent organic food buyer, but vehemently distinguished himself from his brother's lifestyle:

My brother for example, he is far more of an 'Öko'<sup>128</sup> than I am, I am not an Öko. But he lives for 70%, I would say, off the organic store. [...] I have later set myself apart from this a little.

Despite his partition from his brother's Öko lifestyle, he does engage in ethical consumption, having chosen to not to eat meat anymore due to the maltreatment of animals in meat production. As such, he buys his eggs in the organic store in town and deliberately goes for the Bio brand of his favourite supermarket. But he defines himself also as someone who does his food shopping quickly (*Schnelleinkäufer*) and admits going for the look and familiar taste of products that he already knows. When asked for his product choices in the supermarket in his day to day shopping, he defines himself as "relatively normal" and shamefully admits to be "rather inconsequent" in his conscious purchase behaviour, also with foodstuff:

I also really like to have bread rolls, and then they do not have to be Bio. I like the taste. And then I rather eat something which I like and where I feel good afterwards. But if I always eat Bio, like brown pasta or organic Pizza – they really do not taste well – then I do not gain anything. I disapprove everything that is too selective and exaggerated. One has to somehow find his own way. Like: Ok I can take responsibility for that. Else I would have to stop driving my diesel. I would have to buy myself a hybrid car which I cannot afford or use my bike more often [...]. So, I am not consistent, but I try.

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128 The term Öko is used in German colloquial language. It refers to a person who might be very conscious in his purchase and behavior with respect to the impact on the environment, his own physical and mental health and social justice.

Overall, the reflections of the respondent identify him as very informed about environmentally friendly, healthy and conscious behaviour and with a positive attitude towards it. However he has to justify that his behaviour is not always oriented along these guidelines and thus calls himself inconsistent. This self critique refers to the kind of ideal type identity that the man holds of himself or at least strives for: an ethically oriented, responsible self.

This processes of self description and guiding of attitudes, intentions and actions people engage in has been termed “ethical selving” by Varul (2009) in his study on ethical consumption patterns, examining the case of fair-trade products. Within this process people not only distinguish themselves from others, but also define their own identity’s characteristics and formulate categories of self perception. Such “ethical selving” shapes, in principle, the attitudes and beliefs of morality or morally righteous behaviour of the people. The term ethical selving combines two factors that play a crucial role in the formation of an ethical identity: ethical obligation, the feeling that one has to do what is considered right, and self identity or self affirmation, the fact that people try to act alongside their self image. Also Varul notes that obligation and self perception are factors which shape and are at the same time shaped by the practice of ethical behaviour. This means that in an ideal situation an ethical consumer reinforces his self image and acts according to the obligation he feels in every consumption choice he makes. But one cannot always say which factor prevails:

It is difficult to disentangle consumer motives between an ethically driven desire to be responsible, and more selfishly oriented desires to feel and to be perceived by others to be socially responsible (ibid, p.183).

The factor of social responsibility makes clear that ethical selving is a process embedded in existing social discourses, such as debate on sustainability and ecological modernisation as stated above, which serve as a frame of reference for the modelling of an “ethical self” (p.187). But one can also be aware of these social obligations, have an ethically oriented self-perception and attitude, but still not engage in conscious consumption. For example, in the case of one young man, his first statement to me was: “[o]f course one buys Bio, are there any arguments against it?” Later on, however, it became apparent that he “would” only choose the organic variant of certain products, but does not do so in reality, although he never directly admitted this.

This observation leads to certain reflexivity concerning the verification of the interview responses: the discrepancy between attitudes and actual behaviour reveal an aspect of

identity formation that Joseph Huber calls the phenomenon of social desirability (Soziale Erwünschtheit) (2001, p.400). Huber explains that in recent times the dominant public social norm has emerged, in that one must have a “green consciousness” but in fact most people have a rather lax attitude towards environmental issues. He talks of a double moral standard in which there is a significant gap between this declaration and their actual consciousness and behaviour, which is mostly utilitarian in nature with an emphasis on personal wishes. Many also externalise environmental concerns, push it towards others and see it not as their responsibility to change their behaviour. But in order not to appear “unethical” they talk as if they were very conscious in their choices:

In the course of the social assimilation of environmental consciousness and an establishment of environmental politics have environmentally oriented attitudes and behavioural variants become a common social norm. One cannot dare to go against it without putting at risk his reputation and social connection (ibid).

Buying organic foods seems to have become a virtue in our society with certain people putting high emphasis on such selective purchase, be it for personal or altruistic reasons. Despite the general acknowledgement of ethical/organic consumption, it was observable that the distinction between these motives was important for some respondents. Especially those frequently buying organic products and those who placed an emphasis on shopping locally analysed their own attitudes and intentions. Sometimes this also served as a rationalisation and evaluation of their own behaviour and practices. One woman who is very conscious about her grocery purchase stated:

Well it is a lifestyle issue, which one can support. But its right, I think many people go to the store, because their neighbour goes there and because it has become a virtue of some sort. But with me it's always like that, I do it out of my own incentive. And always within the framework that I always set for myself.

Some of the more consciously oriented consumers were also very critical about their own behaviour and the inconsistencies it shows. Consequently, they defined themselves in a way reflected by these considerations:

I estimate myself as a walker between the worlds (*Ein Wanderer zwischen den Welten*); I try to find a balance between that, what suits myself and what I can approve as responsible purchase.

What this interviewee describes as two worlds are the two motivations that guide human purchase behaviour in general: egoistic motives (satisfaction, well being or health) and altruistic motivations (social justice, support of rural communities or animal welfare). In her daily shopping behaviour she feels she has to reconcile these two worlds constantly. Through this negotiation between the two streams of motivations and obligations (towards herself and others) she becomes a citizen-consumer, as she successfully combines citizenship and consumerism (Johnston, 2008).

Her actions can be described as the *tactics* of her consumption. By finding her own way through the spaces of shopping opportunities, she attempts to reconcile that what is demanded of her by rules and regulations, ethical norms and values of conduct, with that what is suitable for herself as individual. By doing so she makes sure that she is defined as a member of society who acts righteously in terms of behaving ethically and socially appropriate. As de Certeau expresses:

[...] [T]he restriction opposed (through sacrifice) to the indefinite will of each individual makes coexistence and conventions possible among members of a group; in other words, the practice of renunciation and self-sacrifice permits plurality and contracts, that is, a society: the acceptance of a limit is the foundation of the social contract (1984, p.64).

## Buying locally: matters of transportation, trust and community

Zapeda and Deal reveal in their qualitative study how consumers started talking about locally produced foodstuff and aspects of sustainability, when asked about their shopping habits in relation to organic foods (2009, p.702). They name various reasons for the emphasis on local produce such as mistrust in the choices available in supermarkets, the support of the local community and environmental and health concerns (p.697). For rural citizens, the emphasis on the purchase of local products can be an important part of their identity as a member of rural communities (Zapeda & Deal, 2009, p.702). As Johnston points out, the variant of shopping local produce constitutes in fact the ideal type of citizen-consumer involvement (2008, p.260). It gives them an ideal venture for the so called “citizen consumer hybrid”, which combines duties of citizenship, such as sustaining the community with personal wishes of consumption (fresh and healthy food). Furthermore, it is observable that people do take this option with the rejuvenation of

small shops, coops and farmer's markets (ibid). Buying local foods is therefore another aspect of conscious consumption next to the purchase of organic products that comes to the fore when studying consumer attitudes.

In the case of many of my interviewees, especially rural citizens, this choice was highly prominent and altruistic motives of citizen value and support of local farmers as well as job markets were voiced alongside the more egoistic motivations of freshness, healthiness and the feeling of trust towards the personal acquaintance of the farmer. The first kind of motivation is represented in the reply of one consumer whom I asked whether he sees buying local as a citizen obligation:

Yes sure. One also creates opportunities for work this way, for example in the local asparagus production.

More egoistic motives are supported by a statement of one woman, coming from a rural area, who frequently buys directly at the farm shops in the neighbouring village. Her answer also reveals that the issue of trust is of great matter to the local consumer:

In wintertime I go to a certain farmer at the entrance of the village, because he has comparably fresh products there. In summer, as soon as they open, I switch to a farmer opposite the street. They really have regional products, where I even know the very origin, where they come from, sometimes. Potatoes for example, I get them at a certain farm. There I know someone who leases her land to them and there I can be sure, that they cultivate that ecologically. We also get our strawberries there. You can actually buy them without hesitation. And the cost-performance ratio is top.

Her proposition makes it clear that the creation of trust is an important topic in the context of food purchase. Whereas in the supermarket trust is channelled through labelling schemes, frequent controls and the presence of skilled personnel, we can denote from the quote above, that in their everyday reality people prefer to trust other people, such as their friends or the farmer and value knowing the site of production and the people who produce there. In the case of the woman quoted above, she trusts the potato and strawberry farm, because she knows someone who rents their land to this farmer. Her personal acquaintance enables the creation of a sufficient amount of trust, which she reassures in another statement:

Well, it's a matter of trust. And I assume that, here in Germany, especially here in the area, and I can observe that with the vine dressers here, that an immense rethinking has taken place for years now. Mr. Schäfer, for example, vine maker of personal trust to me...I know that he tries to use as least "chemistry" as possible.

This demonstrates how personal acquaintances seem to have a considerable affect on the level of trust given to certain produce. This explains why a great number of conscious consumers whom I have interviewed preferred local products over organic food from the supermarket. In the case of the woman quoted above, she furthermore concluded from her observation of the farmers' practices a switch in thinking in agriculture in their area in general towards more organically oriented methods. This way of concluding that local farmers must produce in an organic way, was mentioned by other consumers as well. It seems to give them a further justification for local purchase practices.

As already indicated, when interviewees raised the topic of buying local, they said that they even preferred such products over any organic food available in the supermarket. One middle aged female from Aachen phrased her explanation in the following way:

I prefer local products to any organic ones. If I know that a farmer from the ambit of 30 kilometres delivers somewhere, than I prefer these products. [...] Bio to and fro, it also depends on the freshness of the stuff. If Bio comes from Costa Rica, then there are not vitamins in there anymore either. So I also try to buy seasonal products.

Here statement makes clear the importance of the associated higher amount of nutrients contained in fresh food. This criterion even prevails before the equally common notion of organic food being more nutritious and healthy (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008, p.164). In the case of organic food coming from abroad, freshness is not guaranteed anymore. The preferred variant is to avoid such produce and buy seasonal and local foods. One interviewee, coming from the rural area around Stralsund in the North of Germany, even talked about "black sheep" in this regard:

You should not put an organic label on everything, because unfortunately there are also "black sheep", who smash Bio on something where there is no Bio inside.

#### **What would be such a 'black sheep' you were talking about?**

Eggs from Bavaria for example.... I mean, it can very well be that they come from the countryside, but just alone the transportation distance the truck has to make,

that makes it no Bio anymore. In that case I prefer to buy the produce that is freshly available at our area up there to eggs from Bavaria. The same is with the fish, which we have right from the sea in my area. When it is really fresh, at best it is taken out of the water in front of my eyes; that is real Bio for me (my emphasis). [...] Also, when I think how many exertions the potatoes from Italy have gone through, than I rather go to the farmer close by. With rural products coming from the ambit you can go there and check where it actually comes from.

For this man, the local origin and freshness of the foodstuff defines it as *real bio*, two criteria with which products that had been transported cannot compete and thus he deliberately avoids them. In relation to this man's definition of 'real Bio', I want to mention the hypothesis raised by Stolz (2004) concerning the reasons for people to lay such an emphasis on local food buying. He argues that in recent times confusions have arisen as a result of public media with respect to food scandals, labelling and quality concerns of food products in general. Influenced by these messages and confronted with a vast array of options in the supermarket, consumers search for simple solutions. This together with a lack of knowledge about the distinction between conventional and organic produce leaves the consumer undecided. Stolz therefore suggests, consumers "take the easy way out" when choosing local products (p.488). This choice is furthered by another aspect that the author concludes from his own results in focus group discussions: organic production methods are not known well enough to the wider public. Even intensive organic food buyers have no proper knowledge of the entire system of organic agriculture. Their ignorance leads consumers to conclude that the local farmers are producing according to organic standards (ibid):

I will say, if it comes from the region, than you assume, that it is 'nature', that the vegetables are 'untreated', I assume that, but I can of course not guarantee it. But I assume that it is decent stuff.

The lack of knowledge about production methods leads consumers to make assumptions about the agricultural uses that may not directly be observable to them, but are nevertheless trusted and viewed positively due to the factor of locality. However, some of the respondents were also very critical concerning their trust in local farmers and their agricultural land use practices:

Well, there is the question of trust. Do I trust a certain label? Or do I trust the slaughter from my village or the retailer coming from the region?

### **So for which option do you mostly go?**

Well, I trust my shopkeeper, if he tells me he doesn't use this and that "chemistry". But what always irritates me is that when I drive along the highway and I see all these vegetable fields to my right. Then I ask myself, where does that all go to? It goes to the regional market. Is there maybe also a "Martinshof" (*the Bioland farm she often buys her vegetables from*) close by? Or how does that work out? This farmer for example, the Martinshof, who does not use pesticides, where does he have his land? If it is placed in an area where there are constantly cars driving by and there is chemicals used in the surrounding, well then....

Their observation of agricultural practices made them sceptical concerning the question: "Where does all that "Bio" come from?" as another respondent framed it. The main reason why they ask this question is due to so called food safety concerns related to the use of pesticides and other 'chemistry'. I will discuss this in the following section.

In this part of my analysis it has become clear that many consumers, particularly rural citizens attempt to buy local products whenever possible. Lesser ways of transportation, the support of the community, the direct acquaintance with farmers or the freshness of foodstuff from the area were criteria that create an overall positive attitude towards the purchase of local produce. However, alongside the hypothesis raised by Stolz (2004) we can also interpret this choice as an escape road, a witty tactic, of consumers, who are unable to cope with all the confusing and contradicting information they receive from the public media. Buying locally is their tactical solution to overcome insecurities about labelled produce in the supermarket due to the fact that they can raise more arguments for this choice.

## **"Chemistry" versus "nature": health, taste and prices**

Concerns over food security can be a driver to buy organic products. Here several aspects play a role, which work on the consumer and shape his attitude on the topic. Amongst those factors are the influence of scandals and their publication in the media, general information regarding foodstuffs received by the consumers and their own framing of

what food safety means to them (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008).

An interesting observation in connection to this matter has already become apparent in some of the quotes above: consumers use their own language when talking about food security. They employ such notions as “chemistry” or “nature”. They do not use them in their usual scientific meaning, but instead they attach them to certain methods of production. When talking about chemistry, for example, consumers usually express their concerns about the use of pesticides and chemicals in agricultural practices. This fear mostly stems from the consumers concern for their own health, which results in their intention to buy healthier foodstuff. The criteria for healthy food are first and foremost ensuring that it is high in nutrients and does not contain any additives, pesticides or genetically modified components as these have been portrayed in the media as being harmful to a person’s wellbeing (ibid, p164).

Health consciousness in relation to the resulting food safety concern is therefore one of the factors that can form a favourable attitude towards buying organic products. This is due to the fact that organic production methods are associated with a less chemical intensive, more natural land use and treatment of food stuff:

**R:** I think it is not good with respect to your health. So when I see, formerly I never thought about that, when I saw during my holidays what they do with the apples...its masses...Also when I look at it here in the region, how much fertilisers they use. This cannot be healthy! And then I wonder how long some products last for, you really ask yourself why. [...] You really ask yourself what they put in there, so that this is possible.

**S.W.:** This means your own health is your major incentive to buy organic food and go to the market?

**R:** Yes, first and foremost I am concerned about my own health and about that of the other people, because they indeed handle people’s health very loosely in favour for their profit.

We can nicely see in this description how the interviewee’s attitude towards conventional practices has changed over the time and how she became more sceptical towards conventional products, also due to their unnaturally long shelf life. Furthermore she denotes her opinion about the high risk of conventional foods due to the perceived fact that the industry’s interest is firstly profit and not public health (McEachern and McClean, 2002, p.86). Similar concerns were voiced by a very sceptical young man, who remarked that:

The question is do I really want that? Organic products are generally more expensive, but are they really better for the quality of life? That's the question. I am sure they also use feeding stuff with those chicken that run around freely.

**So you think the difference between conventional and organic is not decisive?**

Sure they also just want to make profit. And also, is a chicken that gets additives in his feeding stuff really healthier than a chicken that does not get them? I cannot answer that.

Indeed, this man was very critical about the organic food industry and also deliberately distinguished himself as a non organic food buyer.

Others were more convinced about the fact that organic products were a better choice for them in many respects. For example, the healthiness of products and their better taste were often mentioned in combination. This may be due to the reason that organic products have been promoted as being better in general in the media and by famous chefs and celebrities (see for example eat smarter, march 2011). That taste is a dominant criterion becomes apparent in response from a woman, who to the greatest extent possible tries to buy her products at a Bioland certified farmer, who visits the local market. I asked her for the reasons why she preferred the products of the farmer to those in the supermarket and she replied:

Well, it tastes better. I think one lives better, it is certainly healthier. And I realized that when I have bought a lot of vegetables from the Martinshof, that I feel better. Maybe this is an illusion, I don't know. I simply think it is healthier not to eat foodstuff that has been treated with fertiliser. And what I absolutely do not buy anymore, before I get these ready-made sauces sometimes with preservatives and additives, but I do not buy that anymore at all, because I realized it does not taste well.

Another respondent who also frequently bought from an organic farmer said:

With groceries I meanwhile buy a lot of organic produce and a lot at the market, because I realized, it tastes much better. For example, carrots, there I realized it, they taste so good so intensive. They really taste like carrots tasted back in childhood!

Other consumers were more sceptical regarding the better taste of organic food, as one interviewee critically answered: “One trusts in the fact that it tastes better, but you can never say One respondent analysed his feeling of better taste in the following way:

I don’t know whether it is true from an objective standpoint, but from a subjective one it is in any case. One has the feeling to buy something good and automatically it tastes better. Presumably I wouldn’t realize the difference. Just when there is Bio written on the product there is automatically a chain reaction started...its good, healthy, tasty.

He assumes that the better feeling towards his purchase (having done something ethically correct or bought something which is apparently good for his health) deludes him into the feeling of a better taste. The feeling of having bought something “better”, in terms of being healthier or more righteously produced, gives the consumer the impression of a better taste or even as one interviewee pointed out a feeling of well being:

Well it’s also a matter of feeling. You have a different feeling, dependent on whether you buy a chicken that has lived with at a farm and gotten normal feeding or whether you have one that was raised in a factory in a small cage and has received medicals. You really have to admit that you will feel better with a chicken from the farmer.

The feeling of having bought something “better”, in terms of being healthier or more righteously produced, gives the consumer the impression of a better taste or even as one interviewee pointed out a feeling of well being.

In this section we can see that the ‘good feeling’ towards their food purchase matters to consumers. This better feeling can be created through the purchase of organic labelled products. The label is then re-appropriated by the consumer as an assurance for quality and healthiness of the produce. The ignorance about the details of production does not matter for the ‘user’ in this case. It is circumvented by the consumer reformulating the language of the label in his own ways, that suit his needs at that very moment.

## Conclusion: Circumvented obscurities and making do in everyday practices

“When science is pulled out of its home context, and applied to problems in the public domain, it can fail: fail to win the trust of interested parties, fail to recognise its own social assumptions, and fail to deal adequately with messy features of real world problems. It takes luck or hard work of a sort that is both political and technical to successfully apply scientific or technical expertise to public issues (Sismondo, 2004, p.172).”

One can be tempted to see the above discussed obscurity of labelling schemes and the mistrust that is often voiced against them as a failure of political and scientific bodies to convey their message in an appropriate way to the wider public. However, the growing market segment of organic food products (Shaw et al., 2006, p.1050) is proof that consumers do nevertheless engage in the purchase of labelled produce.

Despite the repeated claim made by several studies (McEachern and McClean, 2002, p.91; McEachern and Warnaby, 2008, p.421; Varul, 2009, p.704) that knowledge about the labelling schemes in question is paramount to their purchase, as we have seen, consumers engage in purchase of organic food despite sceptical attitudes towards the labels as such. This shows that the wider context of the shopping decision has to be taken into account.

Factors that have shown to be of influence on consumers' decision to buy organic food range from egoistically oriented motives, such as health and well being to more altruistic aspects of social responsibility, environmental degradation, animal welfare and community. How strong single factors are for the individual and in how far they really matter cannot be grasped in general rules, it rather seems to be question of the very situation and hidden factors of personality, past and habits, which even this qualitative study could not reveal in detail. What became clear however is the fact that consumers do appropriate the information of the public media, of other people and of product covers such as labels, in their own way. The aim of which is to make it fit to their everyday practices of consumption, although they are often ignorant of any details. Moreover the results of this study show that consumers do in fact circumvent their knowledge deficits by incorporating labels into daily shopping practices in a way that fits them individually and for the momentous situation. I have called this way of acting *tactical consumption*. Consumers all use very individual tactics in order to include the appropriation of food labels and other information into daily shopping practices. By doing so, they become tactical consumers in their daily purchase of groceries and other products.

It has also become clear that consumers are not as passive and seduced as they are often portrayed (Varul, 2009, p.185), but instead are smart and active and use the rules and regulations of the market for their own empowerment. This view sheds light on the consumer and his power and ability to be the leader of his own culture, the so called “consumer culture”. Tactics of consumption do create a parallel consumer culture formed by the consumers themselves. This culture is somewhat opposed to the rigid strategies of the world of science, economy and politics that attempts to rule over them. The activities of consumers that are tactical in character and that form their own culture have a political power on their own. Therefore, the activities of consumers are political in a way that they gain power over the prevailing economic structures, oppose their own opinions on them and create their own culture by using the laws and rules of science, economy and politics in an art of their own:

The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices (de Certeau, 1984, p.xvii).

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