

**Parents' Perceptions of Organic Food:
A Qualitative Content Analysis of an Online Parenting Forum**

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Introduction

Parents of young children willing to pay an average of \$0.68 more for organic food (McFadden & Huffman, 2017); it is important to understand why. Redsell et al. (2010) and Hjelmar (2011) found parents believed organic food was healthier than local food. Cairns & Johnston (2015) wrote that parents believed buying organic food is part of good parenting. Each of these studies used interviews and/or focus groups to collect data. Organic food and related topics can be a contentious area (Haspel, 2018), so some parents may not have felt comfortable sharing their true opinions. The current study analyzed conversations about organic food on an online forum where parents are able to interact openly and anonymously.

Theoretical Framework

Online Disinhibition Effect. People are sometimes able to express themselves more freely online due to the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004). Six factors (Dissociative Anonymity, Invisibility, Asynchronicity, Solipsistic Introjection, Dissociative Imagination, and Minimization of Status and Authority) result in both Benign and Toxic Disinhibition behaviors. Benign Disinhibition includes individuals sharing personal emotions, fears, or wishes or their being very helpful. Toxic Disinhibition includes rude, crude, or hateful behavior and/or visiting dark websites (Suler, 2004). The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of why parents choose to purchase organic food or not through anonymous online data.

Methodology

A qualitative content analysis of conversations about organic food on BabyCenter's online forums was conducted. This site was selected due to the high volume of people it reaches (more than 100 million parents monthly) (BabyCenter LLC, 2019). The Community section of the site, which allows parents to search for, and add to, conversations about a topic, was used for this study. 'Organic food' was used in the site's internal search tool and then filtered for Community results. The first 20 relevant conversations (Porter & Ispa, 2012) within one year of the search date (May 22, 2019) were analyzed for this study. A relevant conversation included any mention of organic food in the initial question or any responses. Each comment was coded in two phases. The initial phase found 14 codes. The coded comments were then verified by a second researcher who agreed with 76.7% of the coding. After making necessary changes, there was 100% agreement on the coded comments. This was more than the 80% needed for acceptance (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes were then organized into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Findings

RQ1: Advantages of Organic Food, According to Parents. Two benefits of organic foods, as discussed by parents, emerged from the data and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Advantages of Organic Food, According to Parents

Theme	Description
Safer and/or Healthier	Eating organic is healthier and/or safer than eating conventionally grown food
More Ethical	Organic food is more ethical than conventionally-grown food

RQ2: Disadvantages of Organic Food, According to Parents. Five disadvantages of buying organic foods emerged from the data and are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Disadvantages of Organic Food, According to Parents

Theme	Description
Expensive	Eating organic food is more expensive than eating conventionally grown food
Judged by Others	Parents who feed their children organic food are judged for doing
Distrust	Not trusting farmers to follow organic procedures or not trusting the value of organic labels
Product Quality	Organic food is dirty or imperfect
Not Healthier/ Safer	Organic food is not healthier or safer than conventionally-grown food

Conclusions

Some of the data agreed with past research's findings that parents believe organic food is healthier and/or safer (Redsell et al., 2010; Hjelmar, 2011). Parents in this study also described organic food as being more ethical. The data also revealed several disadvantages. Parents may have been more apt to share their feelings about organic food in the anonymous forum than focus groups or in-person interviews due to the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004). Finally, Currid-Halkett (2017) and Cairns and Johnston (2015) both describe parents judging those who *do not* feed their children organic, but the opposite was found in this study. More research should be conducted to explain this phenomenon.

Implications

Finally, the parents in this study conveyed confusion regarding organic labeling, organic practices, and what "organic" is. With so much invested in organic food programs (USDA, 2016), future research should study how parents define "organic" and what they believe organic labeling and practices consist of. Research should also be conducted to understand which sources parents trust when determining which products are truly organic and what "organic" means.

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