

Marketing and market creation of organic production and consumption: consumer co-creation of 'green' food- and market practices

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Background

This research forms the base for a doctoral thesis that seeks to problematize the role of consumers in creating and shaping green food practices in markets and in consumers' everyday life. The research takes an interest in how various market practices, such as marketing of organic food, work to shape green consumption. It also attends to different ways for consumers to engage in co-creating markets and green food practices. The aim of this research is to investigate networks of actors that either enable or obstruct green food consumption practices in order to detect how to produce green consumption. Parts of the ongoing research has been published in a Licentiate thesis (Stigzelius, 2009) that focused on the adoption of environmental standards in the catering sector, which set the conditions for consumers ability to choose organic food when eating out.

In the debate on sustainable production and consumption, consumers are often portrayed as the problem as well as the potential saviors of environmental degradation. In Sweden, for instance, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (2010) estimated that Swedish consumption not only affect the environment within the national borders, but can also be attributed to influence the environment in other countries due to the consumption of also imported goods and services. By changing harmful consumption patterns towards buying more environmentally friendly products, the consumers are perceived to influence the market and production toward sustainability (e.g. Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010). This reflects a growing trend to solve social and environmental problems by relying on markets (Kjellberg & Helgesson, 2010) and ultimately on consumers to make responsible choices (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).

For example, efforts to increase the consumption of organic food have been promoted as one way of tackling environmental problems in food production. As a consequence, the sales of organic food has increased rapidly in recent years leading to an overall market share in Sweden of 7,7 percent in 2015 (Ekoweb, 2016). Nevertheless, in order to understand the full capacity of consumers to engage in different forms of 'green' consumption we also need to look beyond the organic shelf (Klintman & Boström, 2012). Efforts to minimize the overall ecological footprint from consumption could for example involve avoiding whole product categories of high environmental impact, such as meat products, or avoiding markets altogether by consuming less.

The capacity and responsibility of consumers to bear the burden of 'saving the world' have however been heavily debated and contested (see e.g. Terragni et al., 2009; Webb, 2012; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Critics' voice their concerns over the inability of individual consumers to actually change for the better, being trapped in unsustainable societal and market systems (e.g. Holt, 2012). This directs attention to the contexts of consumption and what it is that constructs responsible and 'green' consumption. Moreover, it also becomes important to acknowledge how consumers perceive, adopt and adapt green consumption in order to achieve a sustainable change in their everyday life.

Against this background, a growing body of research calls for a *practice perspective* that potentially could take a route beyond the gridlock between consumers' individual agency and

overall societal structure (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Halkier, 2010). Practice theory is advocated as a middle path focusing on practices as a joint endeavor between individuals, material objects and social relationships (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). By adopting a *market practice approach*, this research regards consumers and their capacity to act as the results of specific market practices that effectuate different forms of engagement in markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson, 2010; Hagberg and Kjellberg, 2010; Reijonen, 2011; Holt, 2012). Moreover, theories of practice give insights to how, by whom and what, consumption is organized (Warde, 2005). From this perspective, consumers are seen as getting shaped by practices, while they also are seen as involved in shaping practices through continually reproducing and adapting them through consumption. The concept of *scripting* is also used to capture specific programs of action, which work to *configure* the actors (Andersson et al., 2008). Nevertheless, actors can also choose whether to *subscribe* to the scripts or not, or adapt them in different ways. Thus, by attending to the production of practices, involving various scripts, it become possible to examine how the actors themselves become shaped through the practices, while they also contribute to shape them.

The aim of this research is to investigate networks of actors that either enable or obstruct green food consumption practices in order to detect how to produce green consumption. How, by whom and what, does green consumption practices get produced? By attending to various processes and practices in markets and consumption that render consumers capable to do green in their purchase and usage of food, this research provides a deeper understanding of the construction of ‘green’ consumers. Thus, this research highlights the connections between market practices and consumption practices and how these work to enact each other in the creation of green food practices. The research focus on three different arenas in which consumers get shaped and engage in shaping green food practices: *the catering sector, the retailing sector and civil society sector*. Case studies from these sectors look into both *marketing practices* that work to shape ‘green’ consumers, as well as practices of *market creation* in which consumers become engaged to co-create and influence the shaping of markets. Other case studies also direct attention to the creation of *alternative* food production and practices where consumers partly seek to avoid markets.

Methods and material

Methodologically, different actors and arenas in relation to market and consumption practice have been studied through multiple case studies (Yin, 2003) in multiple sites (Czarniawska, 2007). Case studies are commonly used to explore and to describe a contemporary and social phenomenon, such as green consumption. Moreover, choosing case studies as a research strategy is suitable for research that asks “how” and “why” questions and study a contemporary complex phenomenon within a real-life context. It is also suitable when the extent of control over the behavioral activities is limited, as opposed to experiments. Case studies can then be used if the contextual conditions purposefully need to be included in the study of a phenomenon. Typically, there are no clear cuts between the phenomenon and context in real-life situations, which lead to many more variables of interest in case studies than in e.g. surveys where the external variables are limited on purpose. Because of the rich set of variables in case studies, the data collection techniques and data analysis become important. The main data collection techniques for case studies are direct observations of the studied event and interviews of the persons involved in this event (Yin, 2003). In order to come close to the practices of consumers, methods drawn from Actor Network Theory were employed that involved explicit efforts to ‘follow the actors’ (Latour, 2005). When selecting, designing and analyzing the cases for the studies in this research, a number of different considerations were made.

The individual cases presented here were selected for their respective theoretical relevance seeking to address various issues in relation to the development and adoption of green food practices in markets and consumption. The case studies are combined in order to provide a variation in how green consumption is addressed, thus making the cases *complementary* rather than comparative. In order to get a broader perspective on the processes involved in putting food on the table (whether it is at home, in a restaurant or public catering setting), the case studies include various initiatives to do green within both restaurants and retailers and how it may be perceived by the consumer. Moreover, taking on more of a consumer perspective on producing green consumption, other case studies involve civil society driven organizations, where one case looks into a collective urban gardening initiative that teach how to grow your own organic vegetables. Another case studies the local unit of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) that set out to teach consumers to cook more climate clever food.

The actors and actions in these different sites have been followed through primarily qualitative and ethnographic methods of data collection, such as *participant observation* and *semi-structured interviews* with the participants. An *auto-ethnographic* account was also performed during episodes of participant observations, which provided an in-depth account and first-hand reflections of engaging in the practice (Ellis et al., 2011). The materials used during data collection have mainly been a voice recorder and camera, neatly combined in the software and hardware of a mobile phone. A lap-top was used to transcribe and analyze the collected material.

Results

The results of this research are here grouped into three different sections connected to the different empirical sectors under study; the catering sector; the retail sector; and civil society sector.

The catering sector was studied with a particular interest for the procurement conditions for organic food in private and public restaurants. Despite the fact that organic food and eating away from home represents two growing trends in Sweden, the catering sector lags behind in supplying organic food to the market. While there is an abundant of research on organic food within retailing, relatively little research has been offered on the professional purchasers' abilities in catering for organic food. The catering sector has for long had a rather limited share of the overall organic food market (17,5 percent), whereas the retailing sector has the largest share (71 percent) according to the Swedish Ecological Farmers (2008). Thus there is a large potential in the catering sector for further development of the organic food market. Moreover, beef is a food product that has gained increased attention in public debate due to reported problems of animal cruelty and its heavy climate effects in production. In this debate, organic beef has been promoted as a more sustainable alternative than its conventional counterparts.

Research was therefore undertaken in order to explore procurement conditions for organic beef in the catering-wholesaler relation in the commercial and public catering sector. In order to achieve this, factors that influence the purchase of conventional and organic beef are compared in the different segments. The empirical material in this paper is based on case studies of both public and commercial catering organizations from four regions in Sweden (Stockholm, Uppsala, Gothenburg and Malmo). Interviews were carried out with purchasing personnel in both catering and wholesale organizations. The research focus on obstacles and opportunities to procure organic beef. Results from this research have been developed and reported in several publications (Stigzelius, 2009; Stigzelius et al., 2009; Astner et al., 2011).

The results show that consumer decision making in public catering and restaurants to a large extent is relying on the professional purchasers' motivations and decisions. In the *public sector*,

purchase decisions are motivated by political goals for organic food, in addition to altered purchase and cooking practices that could lower the costs associated with organic food. For example, by cooking from scratch the costs for expensive semi-processed food could be reduced. Another common strategy was to use less meat in meals, which was compensated with more vegetable based proteins. Public kitchens also make greater use various beef cuts from the whole animal, rather than the more delicate ones as dominated in the private sector. In the *private sector*, decisions are motivated by matters of price, quality and perceived consumer demand where organic food could provide grounds for differentiation. In some restaurants that are profiled with organic food, long term supplier relationships and adaptations to local and seasonal products also become important, where they also provide varied meals on the menu based on the whole animal. However, for the major part of private restaurants there is a perceived lack of consumer demand to pay for the increased costs associated with organic, seasonal and local food.

Moreover, results on the conditions for supplying organic food to the catering sector show that the public sector prefers punctual and few deliveries made by one wholesaler, while the commercial sector prefers frequent and flexible deliveries from more specialized suppliers. Public professional purchasers prefer beef produced in Sweden, while the purchasers in the commercial sector prefer imported beef due to lower prices, larger volumes and a more even quality. A lack of volume, ineffective distribution and higher prices are perceived as the main obstacles with purchasing organic beef. Constraints in public procurement regulation limit the entry for smaller, organic suppliers to compete with larger wholesalers. However, there are also possibilities to alter the public procurement procedures to invite smaller organic suppliers to compete with the larger wholesalers.

In a licentiate thesis (Stigzelius, 2009), the broader context and institutional setting of the catering sector was further analyzed. The institutional context of the catering organizations are primarily made up of the national political and regulatory environment, where the Swedish government actively supports organic certified production through financial support to organic farmers. In addition, the government has set quite ambitious goals for organic production and public consumption. On the market there are a few dominating actors within wholesaling and retailing. Moreover, there are different interest groups that work to drive the development for organic food, for example there is a strong organic movement representing the farmers in Sweden and the Swedish Consumer Cooperative Societies that represent consumer interests within retailing. However, there are rather weak consumer groups within the catering sector. This means that the private catering sector stands without external pressure or support for further developing provision of organic or local food to a broader public. As a consequence, the food that is served within the catering sector is often anonymous in terms of country of origin and production methods. There is a lack of visible labels or information of each food product that is served to the consumers.

The retailing sector has been shown to be an important actor in bringing sustainability to their customers, by for example promoting organic food. To buy and cook food can however be one of the most time and energy demanding forms of consumption. Planning, purchase and transportation of food need to be balanced with many other concerns in everyday life, such as economic, environmental and health issues. Despite good intentions of being environmentally friendly and composing healthy and varied meals, the consumer, however, often finds it hard to put all of this into practice (Frostling-Henningsson 2010). In response to these consumer dilemmas, electronic retailing (“e-tailing”) has now been reintroduced on the Swedish food market, in some instances in combination with environmentally friendly or “green” products and services. Another study have therefore looked at how the Swedish retailer Coop developed

Mataffären.se (now Cooponline) in order to ease the situation for their customers (Stigzelius, 2012). Coop's electronic retailing ("e-tailing") was developed as part of their green profile. To shop online is here seen as a convenient solution that not only offers the opportunity to buy organic food and pre-composed food menus over the internet, but also provides environmentally friendly deliveries of the food to the consumer's home.

However, earlier studies on the transition to self-service in the post-war era reveal that consumers play an important role in both contributing and adapting to new modes of exchange in retailing. According to Alexander et al. (2009), the capacity of consumers to commit to new retail formats makes up an integral part of the framework that determines success or failure. This became evident when food e-tailing was first introduced towards the end of the 1990s, which at the time was not well received, partly because consumers felt a lack of control and involvement in the purchasing process (Frostling-Henningsson 2003). With e-tailing, retail staff offers to take over much of the self-service work that for decades has been carried out by the consumer, such as picking and packing the products. Consumers may therefore have to build up new routines when buying and consuming food. This prompts for further research on the consumer responses and involvement in the development of new retail forms for organic food.

Results from the study shows that consumers initially responded to the new offer by a combination of practices; by gradually adapting to the new way of shopping; by voicing their concerns; or by silently shop somewhere else; if not leaving the store altogether. Moreover, the online exchange provide means for consumers to 'do green' as a whole project, for example by offering a whole range of organic food products, but also provide the means for those who only see organic as a part of their overall food practices who also can choose between conventional alternatives.

The role of the consumer in shaping the exchange appears to be multifaceted. Despite good intentions by *Mataffären.se* to invite customers to express their concerns in matters that they feel need improvement, for example through personal messages on the website in addition to an active customer service department, it seems to be an easier option for some customers to simply shop somewhere else. These findings can be explained in light of the classic work of Hirschman (1970) where exit and voice provide different response strategies in revealing dissatisfaction with the organisation in question. Either you raise your voice or simply exit. The type of strategy chosen by the individual is also affected by the degree of loyalty that the individual has towards the organisation.

How the consumption practices are shaped by the exchange provides another explanation as to whether the consumer chooses exit or voice as a response strategy. Since new types of practices may compete with more established ones, for example in terms of planned or impulsive buying, it may become difficult for the consumer to convert to the new practice. As an alternative for those customers who may have difficulty in planning their meals, *Mataffären.se* has more recently developed a concept they call 'Our Dinner,' involving ready-made weekly menus. This initiative is in line with what Hagberg & Kjellberg (2010) refer to as an agential capacity to modify response patterns based on earlier experiences. This perspective builds on the notion that both buyers and sellers are created in the process of exchange and are thereby not fully configured before they get involved in the exchange (Hagberg 2010). Thus, there is also a mutual adaptation taking place where both buyers and sellers become configured through the exchange. Nevertheless, consumers' capacity to actually co-construct the business offer relies on how they are represented in the cooperative organization and how well they are connected to ongoing market practices.

Civil society organizations who engage in shaping green food practices has also been studied as an illustration of efforts to do green beyond markets, focusing on processes of consumer co-creation in production and cooking of food (Kjellberg & Stigzelius, 2014). There are multiple scripts available provided by specific interest organizations seeking to realize green values in consumption. Green scripts can for example be found in information campaigns, green consumer apps, but also through providing education by doing green in practical situations. In this part of the study two additional case studies illustrates how consumers learn to *grow their own organic vegetables* and *how to cook climate clever food*.

In one case study the researcher participated in a study circle where the processes and practices of growing your own organic vegetables were learned throughout a growing season. This study circle was part of a local initiative of collective urban agriculture called *Matparken*, situated in the suburbs of Uppsala. Urban agriculture has been proposed as a means towards more sustainable societies and a way of realizing green values in relation to food. *Matparken* was sprung from the idea to scale up individual's small scale vegetable production to a form of collective urban gardening that could make it more efficient and fun by growing together. Apart from the vegetables being produced, *Matparken* also aims to produce a living green urban space, which citizens participate in constructing and maintaining. By doing this they also cultivate the knowledge of how to grow food in a self-sufficient manner. Implicit in this initiative is an attempt to avoid traditional food provisioning through markets by instead doing it yourself.

The case presenting the practices in the study circle however shows how growing practices are interlinked and dependent on the coordination with both exchange practices (buying things) and consumption practices (storing and using the vegetables). People are still relying on markets, albeit modified such exchanges, in order to make it manageable to grow their own food, for example by buying seeds, various tools and equipment in addition to ploughing services. Moreover, there seem to be a tradeoff between growing things in tune with nature and make the most minimal environmental impact, while also making it manageable to grow together. By procuring a ploughing service and water from the municipal system, the growers saves time to do other things. However, by participating in the study circle it is revealed how difficult it still is to integrate a modern way of living and working with growing your own vegetables. The plants need constant care through watering and weeding, which proved difficult to sustain during the summer when many went out travelling during holidays. Taking care of all the produce also turned out as a difficult project that were not so fitting for a modern kitchen with a lack of storing space. The cooking practices also needed to be adapted to find ways to make use of large quantities of the same sort of vegetable.

Since food preparation practices are likely to have consequences for the demand for food products, it is highly relevant to include them in an exploration of how consumers 'do green' in everyday food practices. Another case study therefore attends to one explicit effort to educate consumers in more sustainable cooking practices. This is undertaken by the *Swedish Society for Nature Conservation* (SSNC) that in one of their local units set out to teach climate clever cooking in a study circle taking place over three weeks. The case study shows that various material equipment, such as 'green' recipes and kitchen utensils in addition to practical cooking skills become combined in efforts to choose the right amount of ingredients and to minimize food waste. However, climate friendly cooking not only depends on the practices taking place in the kitchen, but is also to a large extent connected to the preceding steps in the food chain. The crux is how food in general is produced and transported, in addition to how to measure and qualify if something is climate friendly. In discussing these issues, participants revealed that they employ both formal and informal monitoring standards to evaluate their own environmental performance, where for example 'rules of thumb' help to judge in complicated

cases. For example, someone suggested giving the various food products a ‘plus’ or ‘minus’ based on our intuition. Potatoes and carrots produced in Sweden would get pluses, as would all vegetables grown according to season, while rice and also salad would get minuses, even if organically produced.

What constitutes climate clever cooking? The experiences from the study circle suggest that there are many ways of becoming more climate clever when cooking. Modifying the resources used is one way of producing environmental values along with your food. This is also quite easily monitored due to the abundance of labels that provide simple ways of keeping track. But as we noted during our discussions, such labels do not guarantee the production of intensely green meals. There are always trade-offs to be made, even within what passes as green, for instance between green production and green transportation. Using more vegetables when cooking, whether organically labelled or not, can also be a way of doing green, but offers no guarantee. The amount of energy required for producing and transporting a tomato to a Swedish home varies considerably throughout the year. Reducing waste contributes to ‘doing green’ even if the dish is not very green itself. The complexity involved in knowing the greenness of what we eat quickly becomes difficult to handle, so we develop various shortcuts to cope.

Thus, the cases highlight that consumers may ‘do green’ in multiple and interrelated ways that goes beyond just buying food, involving many co-productive elements that rely on consumers’ engagement and adjustment of the different scripts. Other actors have also been noted to play an important role in adjusting user environments that can enable consumers to realize environmental concerns. The engagement in green food practices may however have consequences for other practices that consumers engage in, which complicate their incorporation in everyday life. The ultimate realization of green values however rests on the bottom line of convenience and practicality.

Concluding discussion

In addressing the question of how, what and who it is that either enable or obstruct green food consumption, two recurrent themes have been observed throughout the different studies. On the one hand *consumers get shaped* to ‘do green’ through other actors that adopt environmental standards and business practices in retailing and distribution. Here various socio-material devices related to *marketing* work to script green consumption, for example in providing convenient ways to distribute food in ‘green’ online shopping. In addition, the way organic food is advertised and sorted in the Coop online webstore scripts consumers to make certain choices before others, but still provide the option for choosing conventional alternatives if preferred. However, the commercial catering sector lags behind in providing the option of organic and/or climate friendly food when eating out. In contrast to the retailing sector, the catering sector does not have any unified consumer groups that could to raise the concerns about quality food products. Consumers in the catering sector could thereby be regarded to lack the ability to be an ‘actor’ in the sense that they cannot make their own choices of what products the meal shall contain. Instead, this decision is left to the professional purchasers in the catering organizations. However, political agents have taken on the role as an actor for the consumers in the public catering sector, while this support is still missing within the commercial catering sector. Thus, the professional purchasers in the catering sector could potentially capabalize a large consumer segment if provided with greater political incentives from both the government and pressure from consumer organizations.

Moreover, consumers can also take a larger role in *shaping green food practices* either by engaging in *market creation* or by adapting to *alternative means* of food provision and cooking in their everyday life. In developing sustainable markets, questions of consumer democracy and

participation become important in addition to finding 'green' and convenient solutions. Providing the means for consumers to voice their concerns and also show that they come to matter in the business practices then become important. Otherwise an easy option for consumers is to choose an exit strategy, if they do not feel loyal to the brand. Consumers also increasingly become engaged in 'do-it-yourself projects' where they try to find alternative ways to produce and cook food for themselves. By engaging in vegetable production and 'green' cooking practices, people become more aware of how their food is produced and what it is that goes into their meals in terms of environmental and climate impact. In this way green consumption can equally be a way to achieve a sense of connection to nature and the community in which they live, as it is a way to get food to the table. However, by not fully relying on the market mechanisms that normally provide the means to allocate food production and consumption, different overflows in terms of tending to and storing large amounts of vegetables becomes hard to manage for the individual consumers. Ways to deal with these difficulties could be to engage in collective gardening where many share the responsibility for the vegetable production, or to procure services that could make the task of urban agriculture more convenient and adapted to the ways of modern consumption.

Conclusions with relevant results and advice to the sector

This research provide a deeper understanding of how actors in both the food catering and retailing sector can work to provide means for achieving a greener food consumption. The research showcase how consumers to a large degree relies on the decisions made by professional purchasers and wholesalers in the catering sector to secure a steady supply of more environmentally friendly food. In this sector, the market share of organic food is relatively low compared to the retailing sector and thereby hold the potential for further development. In order to open up for a greater demand for food with added value in the *private catering sector*, the food need to be made less anonymous in the menus highlighting the added value with organic, local, and seasonal food. Positive experiences from the *public catering sector* reveal that organic food can be introduced without overall added costs thanks to reducing the use of semi-processed food and instead cook more food from scratch, while using less amount of meat. The sector would further benefit from increased attention from *civil society and consumer associations* that could create an awareness of the problems in the catering sector, as previously has been done in the retailing sector. The *retailing sector* need to continue with developing convenient ways to buy and distribute organic and climate clever food that at the same time is open to adapt to the various concerns and needs of consumers.

The research furthermore provide an alternative perspective of how to enable consumers to become more engaged in both producing and cooking environmentally friendly food in their everyday life. There is potential for further initiatives within the civil society that could teach out principles of green consumption in practice (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). This could provide the means to enable consumers to better adopt and adjust to new, greener ways of producing and consuming food in their everyday life. However, this research reveal obstacles for individual consumers to continually tend to and manage their own vegetable production to fulfil the household needs. While collective urban agriculture could be one option, another promising way to make up for the problem of efficiently combining food production and consumption is to open up more agricultural farms for *Community Supported Agriculture* (see for example Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). In this way consumers can engage in food production in their local community by trading their labour force for parts of the food being produced, while the main responsibility for production lies with the professional farmer. In addition, there are

also difficulties to tend to the garden of various food choices in store and its complex environmental impacts, which prompts for more research with practical advice on what different product categories to choose beyond organic, which could help consumers to actually *do* green. An increasing number of researchers and practitioners however point to the fact that the responsibility to drive the development for a sustainable development should not reside with the consumer alone in choosing the right products. Instead, all the actors in the food network would need to work jointly to raise the general bar and only provide environmentally sound products as a base line.

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