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Organically Sourced

In 2002, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented its national organic program, which set uniform standards for organic products and introduced the organic movement to mainstream America. Since then, interest in organic food has seen tremendous growth, and led to organic options becoming prolific and common items on the shelves of major grocers. While organic options have become readily available and accessible to the average consumer, many are unaware of the strict guidelines for organic labeling and question the benefits of choosing organic over conventional items. Seeking more information, many people have started to join a growing community of those who are interested in making organic choices. Each member's participation is influenced by the cost and the convenience of purchasing organic options and ranges from those who have basic exposure to and understanding of the word organic due to popular culture and product labels to others who are strongly committed to organic lifestyles. Although the federally regulated definition of organic as a label requires the product to adhere to strict standards, members of the discourse community of organic supporters have informally expanded the application of the word organic to describe broader ideas such as living a healthy lifestyle.

Even though "organic" has become a familiar term in our society, most consumers are unaware of its complex and strict definition and confuse it with the

“natural” label. However, natural does not have a regulated definition and varies depending on the item's location in the United States, the manufacturer of the item, and the store it is purchased at. According to the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), even high-fructose corn syrup can be labeled as “natural”(Stonyfield). Since something that is obviously not nutritious can be labeled this way, it is clear that “natural” labels on items do not actually provide any accurate information about the nutritional or other health benefits. However, items that bear the organic label must follow strict standards set forth by the USDA’s National Organic Program. There are currently standards set for crops, livestock, and multi-ingredient foods. These standards assure consumers that items labeled with the USDA organic seal have been produced with approved methods. For example, the growth of organic crops cannot be aided by irradiation, sewage sludge, synthetic fertilizers, unauthorized pesticides, and genetically modified organisms. Organic livestock producers need to meet animal health and welfare standards and can not use antibiotics or growth hormones. Livestock need to be fed with 100% organic food and also have access to the outside (USDA). In order for a producer to be “certified organic”, a USDA accredited third party needs to confirm that the standards in the USDA Organic Ruler have been met. Once certified, they are allowed to label their products as organic in one of three ways. An item labeled as simply “organic” means that at least 95% of the ingredients were organically produced. As described on the Whole Foods website, the other 5% is of “nonagricultural substances approved on the USDA's National List of non-organically produced agricultural products that are not commercially available in organic form”. An item labeled as 100% organic is made completely from organically produced ingredients with the exception of water and salt. Products made of

at least 70% organic ingredients can be labeled as “made with organic ingredients”.

Unlike products with the other two organic labels, these items cannot bear the official USDA “organic” seal. Any organically labeled products must also have the name of the certifying agent listed on it (Whole Foods). From farm to grocery, organic items have followed stringent guidelines to earn their labels.

Members of the organic community consider price in their decision to purchase organic options for benefits that may be assumed independently from knowing the specific conditions behind the organic label. The average shopper who encounters an organic option alongside its conventional counterpart in the supermarket must compare the prices and values of each against one another to decide what to buy. According to *Time* magazine, organic produce typically costs 13 to 36 more cents per pound than conventional ones. Those who choose the organic option list various reasons to justify the more expensive purchase. For Nina, a sophomore at the University of Cincinnati, the decision to buy the organic option reflects her concern about ethical and environmentally friendly practices. She says, “I think that buying food should be about more than filling your stomach. Shoppers should be conscious of what manufacturers they support when they purchase food. I choose to support those that treat animals ethically and try to make their carbon footprint as insubstantial as possible.” Health benefits influence others to pay more for organic food. Abbie, another sophomore at the University of Cincinnati, says that she is well aware of the controversy over whether or not organic foods are healthier than conventional ones. While she doubts that organic foods actually provide more vitamins and minerals, she does believe that the pesticides, hormones, and other chemicals in the farming and production of conventional products have a deeply harmful

affect on our bodies. Her belief is shared by many, including experts such as Dr. Philip Landrigan, Professor and Chairman of the Department of Community and Preventive Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. He states, "The evidence is strong -- and validated by the National Academy of Sciences -- that pesticide levels in conventionally grown foods can pose a threat to human health, especially to the health of infants and children" (ABC News). For Abbie, the dangers of these harmful chemicals lead her to pay higher costs for organic fruits and vegetables. She prioritizes these because she believes that they are the most affected by chemicals and states that she will only purchase other organic foods such as pasta if prices are comparable to the conventional options. Her reasoning reflects that while cost is still a deterrent to some customers when considering organic items, many are willing to pay the higher price for organic options they believe are much healthier for them. Neither student knew the exact standards behind organic labeling and said that they had a "general" understanding of the benefits from discussions with others and text they had read touting the benefits of organic food.

When members of the organic community weigh the benefits of organic food against the price, there is a lot of focus on items from the "Dirty Dozen" and the "Clean Fifteen" lists. Developed by the non-profit organization Environmental Working Group from concern over high pesticide levels in fruits and vegetables, both are phrases commonly used by the community of organic food supporters. The "Dirty Dozen" is the nickname for the list of 12 fruits and vegetables that contain the highest levels of pesticide and includes apples, celery, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, grapes, hot peppers, imported nectarines, peaches, potatoes, spinach, strawberries, and sweet bell peppers. An

expanded version termed the “Dirty Dozen Plus” adds kale and summer squash to the list (Environmental Working Group). In contrast, the “Clean Fifteen” is the list of the 15 least contaminated fruits and vegetables and includes asparagus, avocados, cabbage, cantaloupe, sweet corn, eggplant, grapefruit, kiwi, mangos, mushrooms, onions, papayas, pineapples, frozen sweet peas, and sweet potatoes (Environmental Working Group). For those who can not afford to spend a lot on organic items, many popular blogs such as *Deliciously Organic* advise followers to spend more on the organic versions of the “Dirty Dozen” list and to buy the conventional “Clean Fifteen” fruits and vegetables since those pesticide levels are low.

The level of participation of members in the organic food community is also determined by the convenience of purchasing organic products. For the past 15 years, the organic and natural food market has seen a successful growth at more than 20 percent per year, which has led to readily available organic options for the average customer (Organic Consumers Association). Once the only supplier, independent health food stores now face competition from supermarkets such as Kroger and Walmart who carry organic items to large specialty chains such as Whole Foods. Supermarkets have the advantage of offering organic options alongside conventional foods. UC sophomores Abbie and Nina both agree that they obtain the majority of their organic products from major grocers like the nearby Kroger purely out of convenience because they can buy conventional products at the same place. Nina states, “When I’m at home in Cleveland with my family and can easily get to places in my car, I’ll go to Trader Joes, the local farmer’s market and Whole Foods to buy organic foods for my family. But at school, I don’t have a car and it’s not as accessible for me to get to those places. I usually just choose organic foods while I’m

doing my normal grocery shopping at Kroger if I can”. The difference between Nina’s level of involvement in the organic food community while living independently in college and while at home with her family shows that convenience affects level of participation.

While the convenience of supermarkets and larger retailers such as Whole Foods appeals to many organic buyers, others are still drawn to the personal setting at local stores. Clifton Natural Foods, a natural foods grocery near the University of Cincinnati’s campus that boasts a 100% organic produce section among many other organic items, has been open for twenty-five years and survived the increasing competition from large supermarkets. Sam, a store cashier, says that business is still strong due to the friendly store atmosphere between the staff and customers. He states, “We spend a lot of time answering specific questions for customers in store and over the phone. The store owner is one of us and likes to chat with customers about what they’re buying from the store. That’s something that large chains can’t do.” This intimate environment attracts those who are interested in organic food and gives them a reason to return. It is a setting where strangers feel comfortable talking about the organic products they are buying and sharing their reasons for coming to the store with one another. Sam observes that there is no “typical” customer and that the store greets visitors of all ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. The diversity of visitors shows that organic has an appeal to all. Although some of the store’s items can also be found in the organic sections of large supermarkets, it carries a lot of unique items that are produced by small local growers, such as jarred honey and jam. The store also sells books about organic food and wellness and offers the free magazine *BetterNutrition*, labeled the “shopping magazine for natural

living”. Featuring recipes, spotlights on nutritious foods, and discussions on supplements and diets among other information, a copy is offered to each customer to encourage them to learn more about healthy choices. According to Sam, most customers are curious about where their purchases are coming from and enjoy receiving additional information about organic options and healthy lifestyles. When asked about any vocabulary specific to organic foods that is frequently heard around the store by employees and customers, which are both part of the discourse community of organic food supporters, Sam listed no GMO (genetically modified organism), non-irradiated, processed, and pesticides. These terms are consistent with vocabulary often used in organic blogs. Sam says that raw, local, natural, healthy and vitamins are also commonly heard. Although these words are not considered specific to organic as a labeling definition, they reflect the larger application of organic to describe choices conscious of individual and environmental health and buying and growing locally. Sam believes that is easy to become educated about organic food and that many resources are available with access to the Internet. The store’s presence in the neighborhood also attracts interest in organic foods and spreads awareness about the benefits of making organic choices.

The label “certified organic” indicates that strict standards have been followed in growth and production methods. However, supporters have loosely interpreted “organic” to describe a healthy lifestyle and relationship with the community. Beyond simply purchasing products with the USDA certified organic label, followers of the organic movement tend to support local farmers and/or start their own gardens. They apply the principle of the national organic program to “integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and

conserve biodiversity” in a broader, more individual sense by engaging directly in food production and growth. The expanded use of organic within and outside the organic community as more than just a regulated label has enabled the community to develop a diverse membership that takes greater liberty and meaning with the organic definition.

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