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## ORGANIC BOX SCHEMES: FASHION OR DOWNSHIFTING?

Despite numerous general texts on environmental and health awareness of organic box schemes participants, relatively little is known about their ethical reasoning and real practice. This paper presents the concept of organic box schemes as related to theoretical concepts reflecting changes in consumer behavior in modern society and its impact on lifestyles. The case study presents the results of a qualitative study of consumers participating in organic box schemes in Brno, the second largest city in the Czech Republic. In-depth interviews were carried out and analyzed. The results show a low level of knowledge or ethical concern about organic farming and its products. This may suggest that a conscious consumer is rather the ideal and that buying organic food is often subject to advertisement, fashion, and ideological concern about living a healthy lifestyle. However, the elements of a voluntarily simple lifestyle or downshifting in box scheme consumer's lifestyle were discovered.

**Keywords:** ethical consumerism, organic agriculture, box schemes, lifestyle, downshifting.

## INTRODUCTION

There is no question that food as a social phenomenon plays an important role in shaping society. In our society, no one questions the right to food. We do not suffer from a lack of food; just the opposite is true. How do we choose what we eat? The consumption of organic food in the Czech Republic is still relatively low in comparison with other European countries, although growth is expected (Živělová, Jánský 2007, Živělová, Crhová 2013). Marketing experts try to persuade customers that organic food is better and healthier and carefully monitor consumer behavior. We know the percentage of people that buy organic food often, what kind of organic food is sold the most, and how much more consumers are willing to spend on eggs from "happy hens" (Brown et al. 2009, Janssen, M., Hamm, U. 2011, Koudelka, J. 2013). What kind of people buy organic food in reality and why? What motivates them to buy organic products, and how do these purchases relate to their overall lifestyle? This paper focuses on a specific group of organic food consumers: those who purchase organic vegetable boxes. Are box scheme participants at all interested in broader

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environmental connections and organic agriculture or is health most important for them? Do they understand and think about the advantages of directly purchasing local, seasonal vegetables, or are they just following the fashionable trend of eating chemical-free food?

Consumers involved in a box scheme receive a regular supply of local vegetables, usually organic. How these schemes exactly work may differ slightly, although all share some basic characteristics. Although consumers receive fresh and healthy vegetables, and vegetable producers can efficiently market their products, there are other advantages to box schemes. Ideally, box schemes should be based on mutual trust and cooperation between producer and consumer. The contents of the box depend upon the season and the producer. Boxes are usually supplied once a week, and in some cases once every 14 days, and mainly contain fruits and vegetables. They sometimes include dairy products: fresh butter, cheese, etc. Rarely, they may include meat. Ulčák (1997) outlines ten principles upon which direct cooperation between producer and consumer should ideally be based. Above all, cooperation and mutual aid is important, which means that producers should try to satisfy consumers to the best of their ability, while as a reward consumers accept products that are available for an agreed-upon price. Consumers can be sure that they receive high quality products, while the growers can be sure that they will be able to sell their products. Besides cooperation between producers and consumers, we can find environmental links elsewhere in these schemes: they help lower the ecological footprint of food. Vegetables sold in box schemes are not packaged, and they should be local, which reduces the impacts of both cultivating and transporting these products. Ideally, seasonal products are grown that are suitable for the local climate and soils. The direct sale of local products also supports economic localization and keeps money local.

The purchase of organic boxes is related to the consumer and dietary behaviour of individual households and their overall lifestyles and social status. As Counihan and Van Esterik (1997) claim, food draws social boundaries, identifies social differences, and shapes the status of individuals and groups. Exchanging and sharing food shapes family and social bonds, whereas prejudices and stereotypes about food creates social barriers and supports social exclusion. Food can affect gender, family, and community relations in numerous ways.

#### *Organic boxes as a luxury item?*

As Lipovetsky (2006) states owning luxury items has lost its status-defining function. What are the upper classes to do? Perhaps focus on consuming organic food, using green technology, or taking special types of vacations as Lipovetsky predicts? According to Librová (2003), luxury does not only involve material items but also esthetical and spiritual values, freedom of choice, behavior, education, and knowledge in general. For our study of organic box schemes, it is important to define ecological luxury. Librová (2003) defines this concept as behaviour that is characteristically self-limiting, leading to a reduction in ecological footprint and which is related to non-material, cultural values. She

understands ecological luxury to encompass certain elements of behaviour that each individual or household decides for independently and therefore the forms in which this luxury comes are different. Common characteristics include a certain level of self-limitation, disgust for waste and consumerism, and some amount of environmental reflection, while on the other hand there is a certain inconsistency to such behaviour. In contrast, predatory luxury knows no limits. Predatory luxury also involves acquiring rare (luxury) goods but without any regard for self-limitation.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

Qualitative methods were used including semi-structured interviews that were created based on a previously prepared set of questions. Four key categories were identified that were used to create research questions: organic food, organic boxes, lifestyle, and organic agriculture. Research concentrated on one main research question: "How do consumers involved in box schemes view purchasing organic food?" Other questions investigated include: "What factors contribute to consumers' involvement in box schemes?"; "How do consumers attempt to actually purchase goods?"; "How do consumers interpret their purchase of organic boxes, if at all?" The study sample included nine consumers who purchase boxes and were all customers of two organic food stores in Brno, the second largest city in the Czech Republic (400,000 inhabitants). Various types of coding were used to analyse data acquired from in-depth interviews: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Atlas.ti 5.2 was used for coding and analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**PURCHASING ORGANIC** - All study participants purchase boxes, but their consumer habits differed greatly. The basic characteristics defining their purchasing behaviour include: a) the amount of organic food they purchased, b) the assortment of organic food they purchase, and c) the (un)importance of the organic label for them.

a) Amount of purchased organic food - Studying differences in the amount of purchased organic food led to the identification of three types of consumers. The first group, which includes people who try to buy everything organic, are a clearly defined group; the other two groups are more open to interpretation, and the borders between them are more permeable. The "100 % organic" group - Buying organic food is a priority for these households. The supply of organic products is still limited, and therefore these households are forced to occasionally purchase conventional food, but their main goal is to purchase organic food. When asked why she does not purchase everything organic, Mrs. Broccoli replied: "*Because it's not available, but if I could, I'd buy all organic.*" The "40-60 % organic" group: These households purchase vegetable organic boxes in addition to other organic food. The amount and type of food purchased can vary. Decisions are made based on the momentary

situation on the market: supply, prices, and needs. Mrs. Pumpkin explains: *"I'm no fanatic that spends millions or a ton of money on organics, and I shop in normal stores and so on, but I try to buy local things and simple things."* This food is often organic as sometimes people purchase organic products when they did not initially intend to do so. The "20–30 % organic" group: These households basically do not concern themselves with organics. They just buy their box, and only exceptionally purchase other organic food. Their consumption of organic food varies depending on the size of the organic box. Purchasing other products, either organic or fair trade, is usually just a coincidence or the momentary desire for a specific product. It can be seen that the subconscious power of ecolabeling works as this label convinces consumers that they are making careful, healthy decisions. Mrs. Cabbage openly admitted to this: *"When I see the label on it, I try to buy it, or I get things that help support UNICEF. So whenever I have to buy something I'd rather take the things with the label than the one without it..."*

b) Assortment of organic food - In households that try to purchase only organic food, a box is just one part of the organic puzzle, albeit an important one. Vegetables are emphasized as are organic dairy and other animal products: cheeses, butter, eggs, etc. The purchase of organic meat is critical, and it is viewed as being the most problematic and also the most expensive. So-called "farmer boxes" may contain cheeses, butter, etc. There were no vegetarians in this group, although all participants stated that they do not need to eat meat every day and add that they gladly pay more for high-quality, healthy meat. Mrs. Broccoli says: *"In the autumn, they had excellent organic beef. In one week, I ate about 3/4 kg of beef. I've never done that before; it was so excellent."* The differences between organic food and conventional food are, according to box scheme participants, most noticeable with meat. There are clear differences in taste and aroma to these people. In addition to fresh organic food, these households also buy non-perishable organic products (flour, legumes, sugar, pasta, vinegar, oil, ketchup, mustard, tomato paste, etc.) The second group of consumers involved in box schemes primarily consumes the organic food they receive in their boxes. They consider vegetables to be the most important part of their diet. On the one hand, quality, health, and flavor are important, but so is the concept of returning to simple, traditional foods, to seasonal products, and to unusual types of vegetables. When asked if she minds receiving turnips, pumpkins, and beets in her box, Mrs. Pumpkin responds: *"No, it doesn't bother me at all. We've already had beets three times, so we had everything with them. Beet pancakes, beet cakes, beet salad, and beet in chocolate bread."* These consumers are not strict about buying other organic products. When they do purchase other organic products it is more a reflection of season, price, availability, or coincidence.

The last group purchases only an organic box and buys other organic food only exceptionally. For them, vegetables are healthy, and the vegetables they get are chemical-free. Mrs. Lettuce describes the situation: *"It is a*

*downward spiral, because you have to eat healthy, so you eat more vegetables and go buy a ton of vegetables in the store, but they contain a ton of pesticides as well... and you eat everything... liver problems, allergies...."*

c) Organic? This category can be broken down into two parts. One important part is the importance of the organic label. Another important factor is how organic box consumers understand the organic label, if at all, and what this means for their purchasing behaviour. The first group considers the organic label to be of critical importance. For them, the organic label is what separates high quality and healthy food from normal food, as Mrs. Tomato explains: *"For us, organics are a kind of guarantee that they're not full of chemicals."* The second group does not have such well-defined attitudes towards organic certification. It is not that these consumers do not trust the certification or that chemical-free food is not important for them. They also emphasize chemical-free quality, which they think can be achieved without the organic label. Certification is viewed as a complicated process, which takes the farmer away from doing real work. Mrs. Pumpkin, who shares similar experience from her job, speaks about farmers she knows: *"Well, I think that the paperwork is terribly complicated... [some non-organic certified farmers] don't use fertilizers either and say that it is more expensive. Their cows are also out on the pastures, and so once we were talking and we asked if organic wouldn't be better for them and they said that there would be so many inspections and paperwork and just senseless problems."* The last group has the most open opinions on certification, which, again, does not mean that fresh and healthy food is not important. Just the opposite is the case. Mr. Eggplant says about his purchase of organic food: *"Like I don't emphasize it, so I must say, that I don't know what organic means exactly. I'm not the type that has to buy everything organic... We tried these things out [boxes] and found out that those things, although they aren't as beautiful as the things in the supermarkets, were good, and for me, that's enough."*

We have created the following three categories of box scheme consumers:

The organic maximalist – They purchase as much organic food as possible. Vegetable boxes are just one part of their organic puzzle. The unavailability of certain types of goods is a barrier. These households consume a wide and relatively stable array of organic food.

The organic seeker - The amount of organic food they purchase varies. In addition to the vegetable box, other organic food is purchased. The array and amount of organic food depends on the current situation, the season, prices, and supply. People in this category can support non-certified organic producers and alternative sales methods.

The organic box consumer - The amount and array of organic food they purchase is basically stable. Only the vegetable box is purchased, and the purchase of other organic products is more a question of chance than targeted desire. Organic certification is viewed as a certain guarantee of quality. Positive personal experience is also extremely important.

The following Table 1 outlines the characteristics of these three types of box scheme consumers.

Table 1. Three types of box scheme consumers

	<b>The organic maximalist</b>	<b>The organic seeker</b>	<b>The organic box scheme consumer</b>
<b>Amount of organic food</b>	As much as possible	Half and half	Vegetables from the box
<b>Array of organic food</b>	Relatively stable and varied	Besides vegetables, variable	Stable, variable depending on box contents
<b>The importance of the organic label</b>	Very important	Not fully defined	Relatively unimportant

**HEALTH AND FLAVOR** - Throughout the entire study, it was repeatedly confirmed that the main factor that draws consumers to buying boxes is the idea that they are consuming healthy vegetables. Health issues were reflected in their motivations for buying organic vegetables in two ways. Existing health problems, such as allergies and eczema, were one reason people searched out healthy chemical-free organic food. Another reason was prevention. On this topic, Mrs. Tomato stated: *"We began to become interested in what we were eating when our four-month-old daughter got atopic eczema, so that's how we got into it. Now, I have to say that we no longer have skin problems, and well she doesn't have too many problems, because we are trying hard to influence it with what we eat."* It is clear that the relationship between food and health is a given for box scheme participants. This is true even for those without any health problems. Another way in which health aspects were reflected in the purchase of organic food could be characterized as a return: a return to traditional, authentic, seasonal food. This kind of food is clearly viewed by organic box scheme participants as healthy, tasty, and fresh. It is a return to the "olden days" and involves on one hand perfecting earlier foodways, but also includes a relatively uncritical admiration of traditional farming methods.

Although they do not analyze the situation too deeply and think only about pesticide-free vegetables, there is no reason to question their intentions. Librová (2003:167) states that "green purchasing behavior may become a good stimulus for deeper thinking about the environmental consequences of everyday behavior." Moreover, ongoing scientific debates about organic food would most likely disappoint box scheme participants, as it seems that organic food is not as healthy as claimed (Dangour et al. 2010). It is however possible that the findings of international comparative studies would not interest them as they are more focused on their own subjective view of the benefits of healthy food. Bauman (2002) and Lipovetsky (1983, 2006) consider the never-ending pursuit of health, wellness, and fitness to be a classical symptom of modern society. „One thing the fitness-seekers know for sure is that they are not fit enough, yet, and that they must keep trying“ (Bauman, 2000).

LOCAL FOOD? - The importance of local products for interviewees turned out to be much less than expected. Their more-or-less superficial knowledge about and awareness of organic agriculture is more understandable than the fact that consumers are not particularly interested in the benefits of local food with the exception of freshness and quality. Mr. Eggplant shared his opinions on buying food from Austria and Slovakia: *"I guess it would bother me, but if the quality was the same, then no. I'm not such a big patriot that everything must be Czech."* Therefore, quality is the most important factor. Nonetheless, when asked about the importance of local products, some interviewees gave no response. Mrs. Pumpkin stated: *"Yeah, yeah, they are our farmers, and they don't transport the vegetables half way around the world, and that's why it's ineffective or not ecological, even though I'm not an environmentalist... and you are supporting our farmers at the same time."* Supporting farmers seems to be more of a general proclamation, as most box scheme participants were unable to say exactly where or from whom their vegetables come.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that box scheme participants are part of the existing market structure. Their inclusion in normal consumer patterns fits with Lipovetsky's (2006) theory of a hyper-consumerist society. The distribution of organic food in supermarkets is truly just another market mechanism leading towards green consumption. From interviews, it was discovered that box scheme participants consider their food purchasing and consuming behaviour to be non-standard and elite. For them, food definitely has a status-shaping function. According to them, they have dietary habits that are a step above the general populations. Emphasis on high quality, yet simple food, is certainly an ecological luxury.

Even though box scheme participant more or less follow normal consumer patterns, their market behaviour is something special. Their lifestyle is influenced by their relationship with good, healthy food in general. This is reflected in family relationships and the make-up of households, as well as in the opinions and attitudes of box scheme consumers towards broader environmental connections. This all impacts their consumer behaviour and leads them to confirm that they are heading on the right path in separating themselves from the purchasing and dietary behaviour of the majority.

As a reminder, there are three types of box scheme consumers that we identified. These are the *organic maximalist*, the *organic seeker*, and the *organic box scheme consumer*. These groups have different basic characteristics (in purchasing organics: the amount of organic food, the array of organic food, and the (an)-importance of certification) and differ in other ways as well (relationship to the organic business and supermarkets, their opinion on organic agriculture and local products).

These differences in opinion were critical for interpreting the consumption patterns of each group. Thus, the authors assume that each group represents a different type of individualized lifestyle. It seems that the *organic maximalist* lives up to Foucault's model of the art of living (*savior-vivre* or *Lebenskunst*) and belongs to Simmel's category of qualitative individualism. This

is a parallel to Librová's voluntarily simple lifestyle, the primary goal of which is not environmentally friendly behaviour; this is just an added value. For the organic maximalist, boxes containing organic vegetables and all other organic foods are examples of green consumption without limits, which confirms Lipovetsky's (2006) theory of hyper-consumption.

*The organic box scheme consumer* fits Foucault's model of the art of living and thus qualitative individualization. We can view organic box scheme consumers as proponents of voluntary simplicity. Their lifestyle fits with Librová's concept of voluntary simplicity (1999). It is not well-defined and as a result this behaviour is environmentally friendly essentially as a side effect. We assume that if the lifestyles of organic box scheme consumers were to change, then it will likely be by a change towards becoming an organic maximalist.

The last type of consumer is the *organic seeker*. These people are intentionally "simple" as defined by Weber's sociological model of *Lebensführung*. Intentional simplicity is based on a rational and purposeful reduction of consumption and ecological footprint and on considering the consequences of one's own behaviour. Organic seekers are on the path; they are looking and thinking and distance themselves from consumerism. They do not just want to make better purchases; they want to do it in a different way. Lipovetsky's (2006) alternative consumer label does not apply to them. It seems as if they truly do avoid modern market mechanisms, or at least, they would like to do so.

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