





# Image Configuration of Organic Food and its Motivation for Consumption

Deonir De Toni <sup>I</sup>  
Gabriel Sperandio Milan <sup>II</sup>  
Fabiano Larentis <sup>III</sup>  
Luciene Eberle <sup>IV</sup>  
Aline Weste Procópio <sup>V</sup>

 <sup>I</sup> Universidade de Caxias do Sul, Caxias do Sul, RS, Brasil.

 <sup>II</sup> Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil.

 <sup>III</sup> Universidade de Caxias do Sul, Caxias do Sul, RS, Brasil.

 <sup>IV</sup> Universidade de Caxias do Sul, Caxias do Sul, RS, Brasil.

<sup>V</sup> Universidade de Caxias do Sul, Caxias do Sul, RS, Brasil.

**Abstract:** The search for organic food has been growing in recent years due to the concern with health and the environment. Evidence shows that the image of organic food can be configured from hedonic meanings, through the symbolic and social dimensions and utilitarian meanings, through the rational and sensorial dimensions. Thus, we sought to identify the configuration of organic food image for its customers and motivations for consumption. Based on a survey of 275 organic food customers with the Image Configuration Method (ICM), it was identified that the central image of these customers is formed by attributes related to non-agrochemical products, health, natural food, healthier food, and preserving the environment, strengthening a predominance of hedonic meaning. Furthermore, the motivations for consumption are linked to a concern with healthier and non- agrochemical food.

**Keywords:** Image Configuration; Organic Food; Consumption.

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## Introduction

The search for organic products has been intensifying in recent years, mainly due to a more significant concern with people's health and well-being, as well as with the environmental impacts of conventional products (DIAS et al., 2015; HJELMAR, 2011; LOTTER, 2003; SABA; MESSINA, 2003). This emerging market has increased environmental and social awareness and influenced customers to choose organic products (SARKIS; ZHU; LAI, 2011). In addition to environmental awareness, health-related attributes have become as important as those related to taste, sensory appearance, familiarity, and convenience (FREDERICO; SILVA; FREIRE, 2013; LEE; YUN, 2015). On the other hand, the consumption of this type of food suffers restrictions concerning its access and the purchasing power of families (ROSE, 2010; ANNINOU; FOXAL, 2017).

From bibliometric studies, Farias (2019) identified growth in research related to organic food. Part of this interest may be allied to increasing consumption of organic food and beverages worldwide (HEMMERLING; HAMM; SPILLER, 2015; DE TONI et al., 2017). In this sense, a gap in research is observed relating to the understanding of how this products' image is configured in customers' minds. Dias et al. (2015) stimulate research to investigate the attributes and motivations for the consumption of organic food and the values involved in its consumption. In this sense, this study's main objective is to identify how the image of organic food is configured in the minds of its customers.

In order to achieve this goal, the Image Configuration Method, a methodology developed and validated by Schuler and De Toni (2015), constitutes an adequate and innovative tool to understand the image configuration of organic food. This methodology advances in relation to previous studies that have already identified the attributes that make up the image of organic food because it presents not only the attributes but also how they are organized in customers' minds regarding their central and peripherals elements, and their dimensions.

Thus, from a survey of 275 customers, it was observed that the attributes that compose the central image of organic food concern to products without pesticides, health, natural food, healthier food, and that preserves the environment, strengthening a predominance of hedonic meaning. Furthermore, the motivations for consumption are linked to a more self-centered concern through a higher search for this food to obtain a healthier and pesticide-free diet.

Among the contributions of this study, four can be highlighted: (i) the identification of the central and peripheral elements that configure the price image; (ii) the identification of the dimensions of these images; (iii) the identification of the segmentation of these images based on factors such as income and level of expenses with this type of food; and (iv) the use of the Image Configuration Method as a valid and reliable tool for a better understanding of the images of customers regarding organic food.

## 2 Theoretical Background

The theoretical background of this study is based on the concept of image and its organization in memory, the purchasing behavior of organic food, and the dimensions of images that emerge from customer perceptions.

### 2.1 Concept and Organization of Images in Memory

The image can be understood as a set of representations, impressions, convictions, and networks of meanings of an object (product, service, brand, or organization) holistically stored in the memory of the individual (or customer) (SCHULER; DE TONI, 2015). As a holistic dimension, images simultaneously contain all aspects that form an object, and these aspects interact to create an original reality, an integrated whole. Therefore, the image is an indivisible whole, which gathers elements (attributes) of different natures (categories), and its understanding is given by the awareness of the different components that form it, in intimate interaction and mutual influence.

Images constitute one of man's most valuable intellectual materials and can influence and direct people's behavior. Consequently, the understanding of the images that the various audiences form about the product, the service, the brand or the price constitutes an essential asset for directing market positioning strategies, as well as the communication compound, to better support the performance of the offers (products and/or services) of companies in their markets (BOLTON; WARLOP; ALBA, 2003; ZIELKE, 2010).

Among the different perspectives of understanding how images are organized in memory, the Central Core Theory emerges as an essential alternative to understand the configuration of the image in human memory. This theory suggests that man organizes and processes information dynamically and evolutionarily around a Central Core and a set of peripheral elements (ABRIC, 1984; SÁ, 1996). According to French researcher Abric (1984; 1998), all and any representation is organized around a Central Core, consisting of one or more elements that give the representation its meaning, and occupies a privileged position in the structure of that representation. The attributes that make up the Central Core are marked by collective memory and are stable and resistant to change. Its function is to generate meaning for the images. Around the central system of the image, there is the peripheral system, made up of the most flexible attributes, sensitive to the immediate context. Its function is to allow adapting to reality, as well as differentiating content and the protection of the central system. Peripheral systems are closer to everyday practices and subject to change (SÁ, 1996). While the Central Core is historically marked, coherent, consensual, and stable, the peripheral system is adaptive, flexible, and relatively heterogeneous in terms of content (ABRIC, 2003).

## 2.2 Organic Food Purchasing Behavior

More than 1% of the world and Brazilian population are customers of sustainable food production systems products (sustainable ecosystems), organic agriculture (break in the way food is produced), dynamic agriculture (which indicates the technological revolution in agriculture), biological agriculture (with positive effects on seed germination), natural agriculture, among others (ASSIS; ROMEIRO, 2002; CARVALHO; SALLES-FILHO; PAULINO, 2006). Regarding the purchasing behavior of Brazilian organic food customers, approximately 70% buy organic products in supermarkets, 41% in specialized shops, and 35% in fairs (DAROLT, 2015).

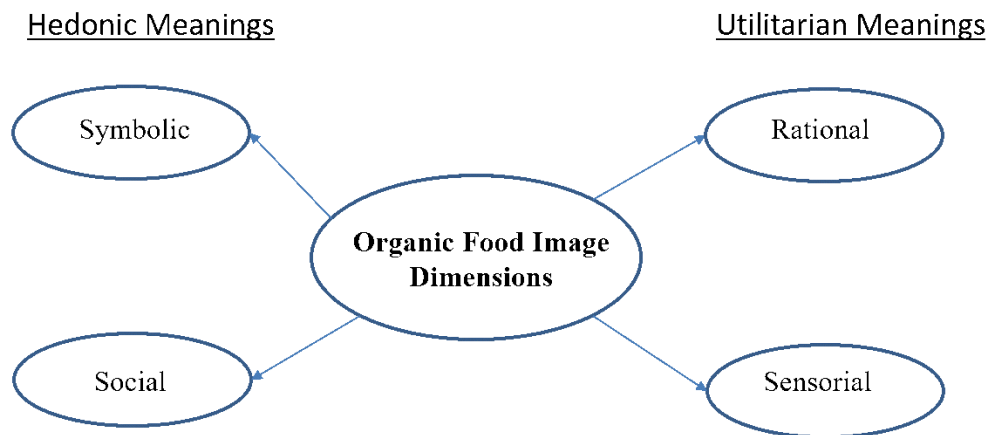
Consumption of organic products has been growing in recent years, and specialists in the sector are forecasting growth of 9% (OTA, 2012). Estimates published in 2016 show that the organic market generated revenues of approximately US\$ 80 billion worldwide, while in Brazil, around US\$ 600 million (ORGANICSNET, 2016). The rise of the market for natural and organic products follows a worldwide trend of increasing demand for products and services that provide health and well-being (KARAM, 2003; DIAS et al., 2015).

For Hjelmar (2011), numerous factors lead organic food customers to buy it, highlighting the availability of the product in different commercial establishments, price level, perceived quality, family considerations, political and ethical concerns, and health concerns. Thus, the consumption of organic food is closely linked to an ecological awareness that goes beyond the search for healthier consumption (individual concern) and something that is environmentally correct (social concern).

## 2.3 Organic Food Image Dimensions

People buy products not only for their functional utility but also for the meaning that this product or brand has. As a result, organic food represents much more than its simple physiological function can represent (PEROSA et al., 2009). The meaning of a product can be composed of hedonic and utilitarian factors (ALLEN, 2006). Among the hedonic factors of a product, the symbolism that it can represent for the individual stands out, as it can awaken positive and/or negative emotions, in addition to the aspects related to the connections with the individual's life purpose. Therefore, the hedonic meaning can be related to symbolic and social dimensions. The utilitarian meaning can be related to rational and sensorial dimensions (SCHULER; DE TONI, 2015), as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Meanings and Dimensions of Organic Food Image



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The symbolic dimension indicates how products are evaluated for what they represent or mean to the individual or customer. This dimension corresponds to the process of representing thought in signs, through which the subject represents and interprets the world, dealing with the object abstractly and symbolically (SCHULER; DE TONI, 2015). Archanjo, Brito, and Sauerbeck (2001) sought to understand what symbolic value is attributed to organic food and identified that the production and consumption of organic food is part of a movement that proposes changes beyond food behavior. The research reports that the organic customer relates this type of food as something that will prevent and cure diseases, assuming a symbolic value of medicine, through which a healthier life is established.

In the image of organic food, a social or environmental orientation is also perceived. According to Lotter (2003), studies show that there is a strong environmental orientation as a value that directs organic food adopters. The social dimension is treated by Guivant (2003) as a set of social practices assumed by an individual, together with his or her self-identity narrative, being part of a recognized attitude towards the environment or social responsibility. In this sense, food and organic agriculture are also related to ethical and social issues (LOTTER, 2003).

The rational dimension, in turn, signals attributes linked to the benefits (advantage(s), the utility of the product), functionality (efficiency and/or effectiveness that generate benefits), and product characteristics (SCHULER; DE TONI, 2015). In this aspect, attributes such as agrochemicals and the production systems of this type of food may also be present, which characterize the intrinsic elements (belonging directly to the object) of these foods.

Finally, the sensory dimension includes the visual, auditory, olfactory, palatal, and tactile impressions that objects leave on people (e.g., color, weight, texture, odors, tem-

perature, and others) (SCHULER; DE TONI, 2015). They are significant in the image composition of an object because they refer to the most concrete and direct experience that the individual has with it. The sensory perception of the object first causes an impression (sensation) that cannot be analyzed and is fragile. Such sensation is what helps in the formation of a substrate for immediate consciousness, even if it is hidden from the emotion or thought of the individual (STERN; ZINKHAN; JAJU, 2001). Therefore, the sensory image of customers has a practical impact on the evaluation of the taste and preference of these customers (HEMMERLING et al., 2013).

On this horizon, the studies of Browne et al. (2000) and Grunert and Juhl (1995) identified that the consumption of organic products is generally attributed to values or consciousness linked to the environment, to ethical, quality, and health search issues. Besides, they noted that specific attributes such as nutritional value, taste, freshness, and price have symbolic and utilitarian meanings in their nature.

### 3 Research Method

This research aimed to understand how organic food image is configured in the minds of customers of this type of product. For this, the Image Configuration Method (ICM), a research method developed by Schuler and De Toni (2015), based on a multi-disciplinary study, tested and validated in different previous researches (ABRIC, 1984; MOSCOVICI, 1978, 2000; SÁ, 1996; DE TONI, 2005; SCHULER; DE TONI; MILAN, 2009) was used. Therefore, as a way to ensure the reproduction of this study for future research, the following steps were used: (i) identification of the public of interest (organic food customers); (ii) sample selection and composition (275 customers); (iii) content configuration; and, finally, (iv) final report, with the graphical arrangement of the results.

The configuration step was carried out in three phases. The first was the identification of the attributes that form the image of organic food from the research participants' perception. The second phase was the analysis of the centrality of these attributes in the composition of the image of these same participants, from the assignment of Order Values (OVs), Frequency Values (FVs), and Total Values (TVs). Furthermore, the third phase was the identification of the multidimensionality of the image relative to organic food.

For this purpose, a quantitative descriptive survey was carried out through the application of a cross-sectional survey. Two previously trained researchers conducted the interviews, and the filter question to continue the research was whether the research participant consumed organic food. Therefore, the criterion used for the sample selection is that they were organic food customers, and a sample of more than 200 cases was defined for possible multivariate analysis of the collected data (HAIR et al., 2010). The interviews were applied with organic food customers, that were approached at the exit of two main organic food distribution channels from the investigated cities, which are supermarkets and ecological fairs. This is consistent with studies by Willer and Kilcher (2009), who indicated that these two channels account for over 70% of organic food purchases.

The data collection process was conducted during October, and December 2015 in the cities of Caxias do Sul and Bento Gonçalves, two of the main cities of Serra Gaucha, located in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Thus, the final sample was 275 valid cases (respondents), and 145 customers were interviewed at the exit of supermarkets and another 130 in ecological fairs.

For data collection, the technique of free evocation was used, which consists of projective stimuli of a spontaneous character that allow access, in a less controlled way, to “the elements that constitute the semantic universe of the term or object studied” (ABRIC, 1984, p. 66). It consists of presenting to the interviewees a stimulus or inducing term (in the case of this work “organic food” was used), asking them to say which ideas come immediately to their memory (MALHOTRA; BIRKS; WILLS, 2012). The data collection tool was composed of three open questions proposed by Schuler and De Toni (2015): (1) When you think or hear about organic food, what ideas or words come to your mind? Please write these ideas or words in the space below; (2) How do you describe organic food?; and (3) What does organic food mean to you?

Question 1 assisted in the indiscriminate identification of the attributes that are part of the subject’s memory. It seeks to generically understand the type of mental representation that the subject has on the object (SHULER; DE TONI, 2015). Questions 2 and 3 sought to give more complexity to the approach, repeating the same fundamental question from other points of view (from the various dimensions of the image). In the case of this research, Question 2 sought to identify more utilitarian and rational elements, while Question 3 was more directed towards symbolic elements. It is worth mentioning that these three questions have already been tested in several previous studies (DE TONI, 2005; DE TONI et al., 2013; DE TONI et al., 2015), proving to be valid and reliable for the object of study proposed.

As it was an open questionnaire, through the technique of free association, in which from the stimulus of the questions each interviewee freely manifested their thoughts, the study variables, in this case, the attributes, which would compose the dimensions of the images, were identified a posteriori, using the content analysis.

In addition to these three questions, the interviewees were also identified from open-ended questions, what types of organic food the interviewees consume the most, the percentage they would be willing to pay extra for this type of food, the frequency of consumption, and the average monthly expenditure on organic food. At the end of the questionnaire, sociodemographic data such as gender, education, and income of interviewees were also asked.

The analysis of the results took place in three stages. The first stage consisted of analyzing the content of the three open questions answers, with the generation of a list of all the attributes mentioned by the respondents. This stage of the survey was carried out by two researchers who already mastered the Image Configuration Method (ICM) and who also have previous knowledge about the study object. All the interviewees’ statements were transcribed in sequential order and typed in an Excel spreadsheet. In the second step, the attributes generated were analyzed as to their centrality in the image

composition. Finally, in the third stage, the multidimensionality of the attributes of the image of organic food in the hedonic (symbolic and social) and utilitarian (rational and sensorial) dimensions of this type of product was analyzed. These dimensions, or categories of analysis, were defined a priori from the literature review, described in section 2.3, which brings the characterization of each dimension in the organic food composition. The categorization of the attributes was carried out independently, first by four researchers already experienced in this type of analysis and then jointly, in order to have a consensus, according to the technique of judges (MALHOTRA; BIRKS; WILLS, 2012), for the generation of more significant content validation.

In addition to the image analysis from the Image Configuration Method (ICM), univariate analyses were performed, based on the mean and frequency of responses, and bivariate analyses were performed using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests, between income, frequency of consumption, mean value spent on organic food, and disposition of price to pay. The objective of this analysis was to identify different segments of organic food customers and their differences in the perception and purchase behavior of these products.

## 4 Results Analysis and Discussion

The sample characterization and an analysis of the image configuration of organic food from the research results are presented below. Finally, the Image Configuration Graph (ICG) is presented, which synthesizes the image configuration from the graphic arrangement of the results.

### 4.1 Sample Characterization

Regarding the sociodemographic data, as can be seen in Table 1, 64% of the respondents are female, 51% are over 30 years old, 68% have completed or incomplete higher education, 73% have income over R\$3,940.00 and 93% live with two or more individuals. Among the organic food they consumed the most, 72% consume greenery and fruits, 61% vegetables, 37% eggs, 26% cereals, 19% meat, and 16% consume organic milk. As for consumption frequency data, these revealed that respondents indicated that 41% of them consume organic food daily, 37% at least once a week, and 22% about once to three times a month.



**Table 1: Sociodemographic data of respondents**

Characterization	Amount	Percentage
Gender	Female – 161	64%
	Male – 93	36%
Age	Up to 29 years old – 125	49%
	30 years old or older – 128	51%
Schooling	Up to high school – 42	17%
	Incomplete higher education – 131	51%
	Complete higher education – 81	32%
Income	From R\$788.00 to R\$2364.00 – 68	27%
	From R\$2,365.00 to R\$3,940.00 – 53	21%
	More than R\$3,940.00 – 126	52%
Family Residence	Alone – 18	7%
	With 2 to 3 individuals – 134	53%
	More than 4 individuals – 101	40%
Types of most consumed Organic Food	Greenery – 198	72%
	Vegetables – 168	61%
	Eggs – 102	37%
	Cereals – 72	26%
	Meat – 52	19%
	Milk – 44	16%
Frequency of consumption	Daily – 113	41%
	At least once a week – 102	37%
	Once to three times a month – 61	22%

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

#### 4.2 Organic Food Image Configuration Analysis

From the three proposed open questions, respondents were invited to freely express their ideas, descriptions, and meanings of organic food in their lives. As a result, more than 1,300 words or expressions expressing their image about organic foods were obtained. The next step, then, was to organize these attributes to understand better how they form the images based on the Image Configuration Method (ICM). At first, their frequency and evocation order were raised. This data treatment was initially proposed by Abric (1984) and Vergès (1992) and aimed to create a distinction between the closest and the farthest attributes of the inductor term. The closest attributes should be considered as belonging to the central image, while the most distant ones should be located at the periphery of the image.

As observed in Table 2, there is the Frequency Value (FV), the Order Value

(OV), and the Total Value (TV) of each identified attribute or expression. The FV corresponds to the number of times the attribute was quoted. As proposed by ICM, to assign an OV, the first quoted attribute receives a value of 5; second, a value of 4; third, a value of 3; fourth, a value of 2; and fifth, a value of 1. After the fifth place, the attributes no longer receive a value ( $OV = 0$ ), only the FV. In turn, the TV is a simple sum of the OV with the FV. As a result, the attributes that stand out by a high TV will be considered as candidates to compose the Central Image of the product under study. Moreover, these central attributes, as presented by Abric (1984; 1998), give the representation its meaning, constituting elements more stable and resistant to change.

Another important aspect is the definition of the cut-off point between the Central Image and the Peripheral Image. MCI recommends using division by quartiles, which allows the identification of the central elements, the elements of the first, second and third periphery, that is, the attributes that are more distant from the inductor term (in this case, “organic food”), and that are more flexible and subject to change.

As a result, four groups form the image of the survey participants. The first group is composed of the first quartile, called Central Image, and ordered from the TVs of the attributes between the numbers 139 and 1022. The second group (first periphery of the image), composed of the second quartile, was ordered from the TVs between 37 and 77. The third group (second periphery of the image) was composed of the third quartile, ordered from the TVs between 17 and 37. And, the last group (third periphery of the image), composed of the fourth quartile, was ordered from the TVs between 5 and 16 (see Table 2).

Table 2 shows that the Central Image is composed of the following attributes: (food or products) without pesticides, (linked to) health, healthy food, natural food, (impacting on) quality of life, taste, care of the environment, well-being and aliment as food. It is imperative to highlight that the results of this research show that some attributes coincide with the studies by Guivant (2003) and Krischke and Tomiello (2009), who identified that health, healthy life and quality of life were part of the representations of customers who adhere to this type of food. Therefore, the consumption of food or organic products is very much related to a healthier lifestyle.

Table 2: Organic Food Image Attributes and Dimensions

	Attributes	OV	FV	TV	%TV
Central Image	1 No pesticides (no chemicals)	734	288	1022	21.16
	2 Health (benefit)	734	259	993	20.56
	3 Healthy food	611	229	840	17.39
	4 Natural food	248	85	333	6.90
	5 Quality of life	180	58	238	4.93
	6 Taste	127	60	187	3.87
	7 Care for the environment	119	54	173	3.58
	8 Well-being	115	39	154	3.19
	9 Food	112	27	139	2.88
First Periphery	10 Nature	61	16	77	1.59
	11 Sustainable living	47	21	68	1.41
	12 Non-industrialized	38	14	52	1.08
	13 High prices	33	17	50	1.04
	14 Nutrients/Nutritive	34	14	48	0.99
	15 Longevity	34	12	46	0.95
	16 Life	28	13	41	0.85
	17 Quality	31	10	41	0.85
	18 Pure/Purity	29	11	40	0.83
19 Eco-consciousness	28	9	37	0.77	
Second Periphery	20 Small producers	23	7	30	0.62
	21 Correct	22	6	28	0.58
	22 Prevent disease	18	8	26	0.54
	23 Security	16	5	21	0.43
	24 Required	15	6	21	0.43
	25 Hard to find	13	5	18	0.37
	26 Ugly	12	5	17	0.35

Third Periphery	27	Light	12	4	16	0.33
	28	Fresh	11	3	14	0.29
	29	Easy decomposition	9	3	12	0.25
	30	Poor quality in appearance	7	2	9	0.19
	31	Bad	6	2	8	0.17
	32	Economy with medicines	5	2	7	0.14
	33	Food reuse	5	1	6	0.12
	34	Inovation	4	2	6	0.12
	35	Origin	5	1	6	0.12
	36	Habit	3	2	5	0.10

Source: Results from data collection.

More than 70% of the Total Value (TV) of the concepts cited by respondents are strongly associated with health. Therefore, it is possible to consider that the Central Image of organic food reports to health as a central element that gives meaning and foundation to this concept, with the attribute “no agrochemicals” being more associated with a concern for health than with the environment, in line with the findings of Krischke and Tomiello (2009).

Another relevant finding of the survey is that about 60% (% of the TV) of the image of organic food, identified in this study, is focused on the individual itself, that is, a predominantly self-centered concern. Consequently, there is a more focused concern with their health, their quality of life, their well-being, which are attributes that stand out in the emerging image of these customers. Regarding a social or environmental concern, it was tied only to 6% of the Total Value (TV) of the images, that is, the care for the environment, nature and ecological awareness are present in the image of these customers, but not in a priority and consistent manner compared to their more self-centered concern related to the consumption of this type of food.

Hence, the Central Image of organic food is seen by these customers as positive and strongly associated with benefits such as superior taste, environmentally friendly, food capable of improving health, quality of life and well-being of the person through a healthier diet. It is interesting to note that such research findings are similar to those identified in other cultures and presented by studies developed by Marian et al. (2014) and Lotter (2003), thus demonstrating that health concerns from a healthy diet are the desired practice by customers of different cultures.

In the analysis of Table 2, the issue of availability of these foods is highlighted since 13 quotations with the term “difficult to find” associated with organic foods were registered. This evidence was also reported by Lotter (2003) in several studies dating back to 1994, indicating that the availability of these foods at different points of sale is one of the main factors limiting their growth in terms of adoption and consumption.

Even if this attribute is not part of the central image of the customers participating in the survey, it is believed that, for unusual customers, the availability or difficulty of finding such foods is also a limiting factor for the expansion of their consumption (SUH; EVES; LUMBERS, 2015). In a study by Chryssohoidis and Krystallis (2005), it was found that more than 64% of respondents to their survey complained of low availability or lack of places for organic food purchases.

Another noteworthy finding is the price perception of organic food. Even though the price is not in the central image of the interviewed public, it constitutes an impacting element in purchasing decisions (DE TONI, 2018). According to Avlonitis and Indounas (2006), the customer's price perception of a particular product derives from their interpretation of price differences and their interpretation of the offer. Thus, customers make their decisions in two steps: first, they judge the value of the offer and then decide whether to buy or not. Therefore, the price of organic food is not only perceived as a "negative" function, of value paid, or of sacrifice, because many customers use the price to denote quality or great benefit (DE TONI, 2018). As a result, the price also has a "positive" role, and in many cases, the high price positively affects the probability of purchase (LICHTENSTEIN; RIDGWAY; NETEMEYER, 1993). Such perspectives can also be linked to the price of organic food since low prices can bring the element of "distrust" that the product is not organic.

On the other hand, studies indicate that one of the reasons for not buying organic food is strongly related to high prices (MARIAN et al., 2014). As shown in Table 2, interviewees cited the attribute "high price" 33 times, reaching a TV of 50 and placing it, consequently, in the first periphery of the image. As a consequence, an important question for future research is to identify how much this perception of price interferes with the process of purchasing and consumption decisions of these foods and whether it is associated with customers' consumption habits and purchasing power.

However, studies conducted by Rödiger and Hamm (2015) show that even in situations where prices for organic food are lower than for conventional food, there has been no significant increase in sales. In contrast, the study by Hjelm (2011) indicates that the typical customer does not think much about the price of organic food, that is, whether or not prices are similar to conventional food prices. The study by Karam (2003), on the other hand, shows that there is a greater dissatisfaction with the price charged in supermarkets when compared to conventional products. For customers who usually buy these products at trade fairs, the price has no relevance to the impact of their consumption. A probable justification for this phenomenon is that the customer, when going to a fair is already directed to buy this type of food and is willing to pay a higher price, if applicable. Therefore, the role of price in the decision to buy and consume is still a matter for further discussion.

In this line, parallel to the image survey, we also tried to identify the percentage that these interviewees would be willing to pay for organic food. It was observed that 44% of the interviewees are willing to pay up to 5% more, 31% are willing to pay 6% to 10% more, 15% are willing to pay more than 11%, and only 10% of them are not willing to pay

anything more for organic food. However, through the Kruskal Wallis test, which measures the significant difference between the variables, the higher the value spent monthly on organic food, the greater is the willingness to pay more ( $p < 0.000$ ). In total, 59% of the interviewed who spend approximately R\$ 50.00 per month are willing to pay up to 5% more for these foods, while 65% of those who consume more than R\$ 50.00 per month are willing to pay more than 5% for these products. One possible reason to justify this result may be following the study of Lockie (2002), who verified that the price perception or the sacrifice necessary to obtain these products is not only due to their price but also the family acceptance, the use (or consumption), the perceived quality and the meaning that such food has for the individual and his or her surroundings (family or friends).

Another reason that may justify the greater willingness to pay is related to the level of income, identified through the Kruskal Wallis test ( $p < 0.000$ ). It was observed, in the investigated sample, that 57% of the customers who have a monthly family income of up to R\$ 3,940.00 are willing to pay up to 5% more in the prices, while 66% of the customers who earn more than R\$ 3,940.00 monthly are willing to pay more than 5% for organic food.

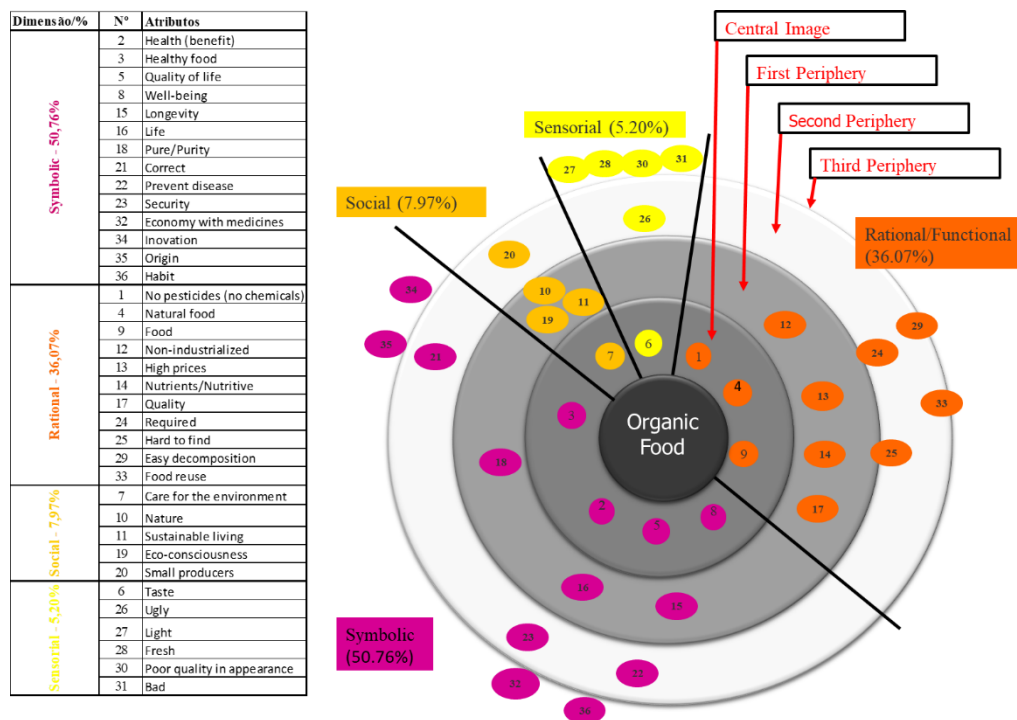
Besides, the frequency of consumption versus the availability of an additional price to pay for organic food was analyzed. It was noticed that there were no significant differences between these two groups (Kruskal Wallis test:  $p = 0.597$ ). Even though the price is one of the variables that have an impact on the purchasing behavior and consumption of these foods, it is a fundamental element to be investigated in future researches.

These findings indicate that price remains a phenomenon to be considered in consumer purchasing decisions of organic food. Therefore, identifying and understanding the market segments or niches that are willing to pay more for this type of product will contribute to the creation of an important strategy to add more value to these products and increase their acceptance and consumption.

#### 4.3 Graphic Layout of Organic Food Image

For better visualization of the research results, a conceptual map is presented, the Image Configuration Graph (ICG), as shown in Figure 2, in which the layout and proximity of each attribute to the concept (Central Image and Peripheral Images) of organic food are presented. The second information concerns the division of the dimensions considered, with the respective attributes that form them, and this division was carried out from the sum of the percentages of the attributes categorized from each dimension.

Figure 2: Organic Food Image Configuration Graph (ICG)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

As presented in Figure 2, the four dimensions and the two types of meanings analyzed in the literature review are present in the configuration of the organic food image. As presented by Allen (2006) and Bagozzi and Dholakia (1999), the meaning of a product can be composed of hedonic and utilitarian factors (or dimensions). In this sense, for the participants of the survey, 58.73% of the Total Value (TV) is related to the hedonic meaning (Symbolic and Social Dimension) and 41.27% to the utilitarian meaning (Rational and Sensorial Dimension). Among the hedonic meaning, the Symbolic Dimension stands out, with 50.76% of the TV. In this case, a concern with health, quality of life, and well-being are values shared in the representations of the interviewed customers.

Still, in the context of symbolic meaning, the attribute “healthy food” draws attention, that is, in the representations of the interviewees, organic food is strongly associated with a food that, in comparison with conventional foods, is healthier. On the other hand, some studies point out that it is not possible to state that organic food is generally healthier than non-organic food (FSA, 2003; SOUSA et al., 2012). However, more recent studies indicate that the intake of healthy foods, mainly organic food such as whole grains, fish, fruits, and vegetables, positively affect human executive functions, presenting improvements in cognitive processing with better inhibitory control, working

memory, attention, and planning (COHEN et al., 2016; FARIAS, 2019; FARIAS et al., 2019). Hence, by prioritizing organic food, customers prioritize a healthier lifestyle, which tends to enhance the quality and perceived value in the consumption of this type of food (SUH; EVES; LUMBERS, 2015; DE TONI et al., 2017).

As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 2, the Rational/Functional Dimension was the second dimension that stood out most in the image of organic food of the respondents, with 36.07% of TV. Thus, the image that organic food is non- agrochemical, nutritious, and of better quality from the natural point of view manifests itself as a representation that is in the Central Image of the investigated public.

It is worth noting that Hoppe et al. (2012) indicate that favorable attitudes towards organic food, perceived control (factors that facilitate behavior or not), and previous experiences have a positive impact on the intention to (re)purchase organic products.

As for trust, an interesting study was conducted by Karam (2003), who identified that the customer has different perspectives to assess the assurance that the organic product is real. The results showed that in supermarkets, the customer trust more when there is a formal certification attested by stamps, which gives the guarantee of origin, authenticity, and product quality. On the other hand, in specialized trade fairs and emporiums, the criteria for assessing the customer's guarantee lies in the relationships of trust placed in the farmer or the trader. It is important to comment that the criterion for generating customer trust in organic food, which they buy in supermarkets, is more utilitarian and rational. In contrast, for customers who opt for fairs, the criterion is more subjective, as they are predominantly based on relationships.

Another relevant study is that of De Toni et al. (2017), which proposes a theoretical model that identified five constructs that positively impact organic food repurchase intention, being them: ecological awareness, healthy consumption, perceived price fairness, perceived quality, and perceived value. The results of the survey identified that 55.7% of the repurchase intention is directly linked to perceived value. Besides, the perceived value of organic food is strongly explained ( $R^2=79.6\%$ ) by perceived quality, healthy consumption, and perceived price fairness. Besides, of these constructs, what most explained perceived value was perceived quality and, secondly, the healthy consumption that organic food provides.

In the present study, a strong concern with health allied to food with fewer agrochemicals has been evidenced, emerging attitudes that indicate the primary motivators for consumption. However, there are other attributes such as price, place of purchase, trust in the producer and/or seller, certifications, and their possible traceability, which can also impact the purchasing and consumption behavior of organic food.

## 5 Final Considerations

The growing demand for healthier food, with fewer chemicals or agrochemicals, has increased the demand for organic food. In this context, this study aimed to identify how



the images (Central Image and Pheriferical Images) of organic food are configured in the representations of this customers' type of food. To this end, this study presents relevant contributions to the image configuration subject and, in particular, the acceptance and consumption of organic food.

The first contribution has been the identification of the Central Image and Peripheral Images of organic food from 275 customers. The results have indicated that the central attributes that occupy the minds of these customers are a healthy, natural, and pesticide-free diet, which provides a better quality of life, well-being and helps preserve the environment. Therefore, there is a concern with the environment. However, for the sample investigated, about 60% of the Total Value (TV) of the identified attributes denote an egocentric concern, with emphasis on health, quality of life and well-being of the individual from a healthier, more natural and pesticide-free diet.

Several studies of organic food purchasing have shown similar findings, referring to an ego-trip behavior, that is, an overlap of individual values over collective ones (VILAS BOAS et al., 2006), because of customers being more concerned with individual well-being from a higher quality of life than with social or environmental concerns (VILAS BOAS et al., 2008). Consequently, customer interest in organic food tends to be limited to a more individual or even family concern (SPERS et al., 2007). For that reason, the factors leading to organic food consumption are more self-centered (RODRIGUES et al., 2009).

On the other hand, it is known that organic food production can contribute to a healthier ecological environment with no pesticides, which harm human health and the environment. Extrapolating the selfish, individualistic dimension of organic food consumption is a challenge for greater ecological awareness. Sheth et al. (2011) highlight the concept of ecological awareness as a guiding principle of the person, in which the customer has affection for human beings (himself/herself included), the community, and nature. Therefore, ecological awareness or conscious consumption result from a process of individual reflection, as well as a sense of belonging to the environment, representing a social process directed by the individual and organizations (DE TONI et al., 2017), in order to stimulate this attitude, which is a positive way to contribute to a more collaborative and healthy society.

The second contribution of this research has been in identifying the meaning and dimensions that form an organic food image, with its configuration pervading the Rational/Functional, Symbolic, Sensorial, and Social Dimensions. In this direction, the research has evidenced that the four dimensions presented in the theoretical framework are present in the representations of the organic food concept in the perception of the researched customers. Therefore, understanding that the concept of organic food is multidimensional is an essential aspect to better direct marketing or communication strategies for this type of food.

The third contribution of this research has been the identification of the different segments and their different perceptions regarding the predisposition to overpay for organic food. Customers who spend more on organic food and those with a higher

monthly income are willing to pay 10% more than they would for conventional food. These research findings are essential for targeting pricing strategies based on perceived value. Previous studies by De Toni et al. (2017) identified that organic food customers perceive a higher value in this type of food, thus justifying a higher price. Logically, the price remains a phenomenon to be considered in the purchasing decisions of organic food customers, and new studies need to identify the practical impacts on the purchasing decision process of this type of product.

A fourth contribution of the organic food image study concerns the use of the Image Configuration Method (ICM) since the results can be considered reliable, as several previous studies with different methods, such as the Guivant (2003) and Krischke and Tomiello (2009) studies, identified similar results. However, what distinguishes the Image Configuration Method (ICM) from other methods is the possibility of a more holistic understanding of the image of organic food, not only from the identification of attributes but also from the multidimensionality and centrality of the organization of these images in the representations of individuals. Complementary to the Image Configuration Method (ICM), is the Image Configuration Graph (ICG), shown in Figure 2, which allows a holistic view of the identified images and their respective attributes, that is, it presents itself as a systemic way to visualize better the image configuration of the analyzed product.

Studies indicate that limitations in product availability, high price, lack of confidence in product descriptions (information) and labels or packaging, and insufficient knowledge of the nutrients in organic food make it difficult to accept and spread their consumption (HJELMAR, 2011). Therefore, comparative studies between organic food customers and conventional food customers are necessary to further determine the difference in the attitudes and behaviors of these two groups of consumers, in order to test the role of risk perception in purchasing decision making (SABA; MESSINA, 2003) and examine the different characteristics of these two groups and how their perceptions and beliefs differ.

As stated by Klöckner and Ohms (2009), expectations, perceptions, and images from customers may vary according to the category of organic food analyzed. As a result, future research could investigate in more detail the images and motivations for the consumption of different types of organic food.

One of the limitations of this study relates to sampling. The sample of this study, besides being non-probabilistic, for convenience, comprised customers from only two cities from southern Brazil (Bento Gonçalves and Caxias do Sul). Therefore, the relevance of this study demonstrates only the image of customers from these two cities, being only a reference for the rest of the country. For a greater external validity of the research results, we suggest new researches with probabilistic samples and carried out in different regions of the country or abroad. In different regions of the country or other countries, there may be the configuration of different images of organic food customers, impacting differently on the purchasing behavior and consumption of this type of product.

Similarly, this study did not research the association between the place of purchase and its perception of price levels. However, besides directing the sale of organic food to

specific niches and higher income, it is essential to create public policies that encourage the production and marketing of this type of food. An example is Law Number 16,684 of March 19, 2018, of the State of São Paulo, which established the State Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production. Such policies may promote and encourage the development of agroecology and organic production, make organic food cheaper, and encourage its consumption for different income levels.

Finally, understanding the customer through the configuration of images and their motivations for organic food consumption is a relevant task for both government agencies and private companies. This understanding can help identify the most appropriate strategies and actions for the increasing promotion of quality food accessible to the population (KARAM, 2003).

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**Deonir De Toni**

✉ dtoni2@ucs.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9637-8099>

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**Gabriel Sperandio Milan**

✉ gsmilan@unisinios.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3480-2653>

**Fabiano Larentis**

✉ flarenti@ucs.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8390-0271>

**Luciene Eberle**

✉ leberle@ucs.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0282-5626>

**Aline Weste Procópio**

✉ alineweste@hotmail.com

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# A Configuração da Imagem de Alimentos Orgânicos e suas Motivações para o Consumo

Deonir De Toni  
Gabriel Sperandio Milan  
Fabiano Larentis  
Luciene Eberle  
Aline Weste Procópio

São Paulo. Vol. 23, 2020  
*Artigo Original*

**Resumo:** A busca por alimentos orgânicos vem crescendo nos últimos anos em função da preocupação com a saúde e com o meio ambiente. Evidenciou-se que a imagem de alimentos orgânicos pode ser configurada a partir de significados hedônicos, por meio das dimensões simbólica e social e por significados utilitários, pelas dimensões racional e sensorial. Assim, buscou-se identificar a configuração da imagem de alimentos orgânicos para seus consumidores e suas motivações para o consumo. Com base em uma pesquisa com 275 consumidores de alimentos orgânicos com o Método de Configuração da Imagem (MCI), foi identificada que a imagem central desses consumidores é formada por atributos que dizem respeito a produtos sem agrotóxicos, à saúde, aos alimentos naturais, à alimentação mais saudável e que preserva o meio ambiente, fortalecendo uma predominância do significado hedônico. Além disso, as motivações para o consumo estão atreladas a uma preocupação com alimentação mais saudável e sem agrotóxicos. .

**Palavras-chave:** Configuração da Imagem; Alimentos Orgânicos; Consumo.

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# Configuración de la Imagen de Alimentos Orgánicos y sus Motivaciones para el Consumo

Deonir De Toni  
Gabriel Sperandio Milan  
Fabiano Larentis  
Luciene Eberle  
Aline Weste Procópio

São Paulo. Vol. 23, 2020

*Artículo original*

**Resumen:** La búsqueda de alimentos orgánicos há ido creciendo en os últimos años debido a la preocupación por la salud y el medio ambiente. La imagen de los alimentos orgánicos se puede configurar significados hedónicos de la dimensiones simbólicas y sociales y por los significados utilitarios de las dimensiones racional e sensorial. Identificamos la configuración de la imagen de los alimentos orgánicos para sus consumidores y sus motivaciones para el consumo. Una encuesta de 275 consumidores de alimentos orgánicos a través del Método de Configuración de Imagen (MCI), se hizo evidente que la imagen central de estos consumidores está formada por los atributos que se relacionan con los productos sin pesticidas, con salud, alimentos naturales, alimentación saludable y preservar el medio ambiente, fortaleciendo así el predominio del sentido hedonista. Por otra parte, se observó que las motivaciones para el consumo están vinculadas a preocupación con dieta saludable y sin pesticidas.

**Palabras-clave:** Configuración de la Imagen; Alimentos Orgánicos; Consumo.

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