

Organic consumption and consumer participation in food community networks

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Introduction

Consumption trends of agro-food products, with particular emphasis on organic food, reflect the changes defining contemporary society, in which modern values, such as individualism, combine with opposing values to form what several scholars call the “postmodern society” (Cicia et al., 2012; Giddens, 2007; Lyotard, 1979). Desire of affiliation, interaction, sharing of passions and emotions are only some of the emerging values of contemporary society. Consumption itself becomes a vector to build a new identity, a means of being recognised and included in a particular “tribal” organization (Cova, 1999; Elliot, 1999; Cembalo et al., 2012; Pascucci et al., 2013).

Of the various forms of such “tribal” organizations a major role is played by forms of participatory action that take place in economic environments. In other words, the market becomes an arena for undertaking and expressing individual political actions. A market becomes an opportunity to express individual ideas, values (of ethical and environmental nature), and cultural projects. This growing trend in consumer attitudes addresses one of the fundamental critiques of capitalism. It is mainly expressed through so-called political consumerism (Cembalo et al., 2011; Micheletti, 2009). The increasing pressure on the environment and the unequal distribution of costs and benefits generated by the liberal model are some of the key elements that have led, in the agro-food sector, to renewed consumer preference for local and organic goods (Cicia et al., 2012). Such goods both meet the criteria of sustainable agriculture and foster social solidarity in rural communities. Consumers in the postmodern society tend to orient their own choices on ethical, solidarity and environmental grounds that are at-

Abstract

Due to improvements in welfare, new food consumption concerns have emerged in Europe. Such concerns go beyond issues related to food safety and market prices. Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GASs) are one way to combine utilitarian and ethical aspects: in these groups the trade in organic products predominates. The aim of GAS groups is to primarily develop a local economy which is both ethical and fair, providing networks of economic solidarity through social relations and economic-territorial districts. This paper sets out to determine the profiles of the consumer groups that constitute GASs in Sicily (southern Italy) in order to search for key elements of the movement in terms of both community networks and organic consumption.

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tributable to political consumerism, although certain aspects such as convenience and brand familiarity are not discarded (Cicia et al., 2012; Panico et al., 2011; Cembalo et al., 2008).

Within this framework, political consumerism, in its institutional implication, generates a model of interchange between economics, the rural environ-

ment and society. This behaviour tends to make both sustainable development and production of goods converge into pooled relationships and social solidarity.

Even if this phenomenon is at a very early stage in Italy, political consumerism has, in recent years, spread rapidly through so-called alternative food chains. One such example is the Solidarity Purchasing Group (henceforth GAS, from its Italian name *Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale*), which represents a very interesting phenomenon of production and consumption contextualization within new economic and social relationships, experimenting creative forms of belonging and socialisation (Schifani and Migliore, 2011). GASs are associations of consumers whose food-related behaviour is oriented through products of high ethical and environmental content, laying particular emphasis on fair trade products as well as on organic goods produced in local, small farms.

The aim of this paper, which is part of a wider research project to analyse GASs and their relationships with local production, is to profile consumers who join Sicilian GASs. More specifically, we investigate the motivations of taking part in a GAS, taking due account of the economic and behavioural model presented above.

Material and Methods

Our analysis involved consumers/participants in 21 of the 33 GASs in Sicily. Data were collected through an interviewer-administered questionnaire. Interviewees were consumers responsible for the food shopping in their household. A total of 535 households were analysed, representing 65% of all 1,629 households. The questionnaire was struc-

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tered into sections containing overall 32 Likert scale questions, with scores anchored at the extremes 1 and 5. For each household, collected information included: socio-economic characteristics; satisfaction assessments of the quality of both products and services provided by GASs; level of participation in group activities; concerns regarding social and environmental sustainability.

In order to summarize information obtained from the survey, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed (De Lillo et al., 2007; Gotar et al., 2008). Variables were selected on their ability to explain the consumption behaviour of sampled individuals. Variables with very low communality¹ values were excluded from the analysis through an iterative process. The selected 18 variables were therefore divided into three groups, as outlined below (Table 1). Factor scores provided the first elements to sketch the main characteristics of the shoppers. Individuals were finally classified using cluster analysis.

Results and Discussion

The criterion followed for the extraction of the factors was to have an eigenvalue higher than 1. The extracted five factors explain overall 60% of total variance (Table 2). The first factor, characterized by political consumerism and traditional market variables such as food safety and low prices, summarizes the motivations that led individuals to join the GAS. The second component summarizes consumer intensity of participation in group activities; it concerns individual interests in cultural activities, visiting farms and food tasting organized within the GAS. The third factor concerns the expenditure capacity of the household, characterized by the following variables: household size, number of household incomes, monthly household income. The fourth factor defines the characteristics of the purchases, as determined by the variables that set the structure of consumption (frequency and share of expenditure) and the type of product (local origin and organic certifications). The last component defines age-related attitudes of individuals to participating in GAS activities and saving money: the

SET 1	SET 2	SET 3
Environmental sensitivity	Low prices	Interest in participatory activities
Solidarity towards farmers	GAS spending frequency	Cultural interest
Trust relationship with producers	GAS spending percentage	Interest in visiting farms
Food safety	Age	Organizational activities
Ethically responsible consumption	Income	
Attention to organic food certification	Number of family incomes	
Attention to locally sourced products	Household size	

¹ Communality indicates the share of variance in a given variable explained by the factors and provides information on the reliability of the indicator. Usually, communality values below 0.35 may suggest the exclusion of the variable from the analysis (De Lillo et al., 2007).

Table 2 - Factor scores.

	Factors				
	1	2	3	4	5
Environment sensitivity	.784	.111	-.018	.010	.133
Solidarity towards farmers	.767	.161	.047	.015	-.132
Trust relationship with producers	.733	.131	-.061	.012	-.251
Food safety	.666	.037	.053	.111	.191
Ethically responsible consumption	.615	.204	-.032	.081	.195
Low prices	.599	-.095	-.038	.009	-.354
Cultural interest	.135	.850	.002	.055	-.053
Interest in visiting farms	.065	.821	.028	-.001	-.041
Food tasting interest	.171	.814	-.019	.055	.065
Number of household incomes	.027	.047	.798	.098	.038
Income	-.004	-.021	.789	.014	-.156
Household size	-.039	-.018	.738	-.114	.045
Attention to organic certification	.117	-.062	.062	.680	.328
Attention to locally products	.099	.149	-.038	.643	.012
GAS spending frequency	.178	.103	.010	-.451	.278
GAS spending percentage	.234	.286	.016	.322	.013
Age	.027	-.002	.083	-.104	-.685
Organizational activities	-.025	-.359	.061	-.382	.439

Note: sampling adequacy was tested through the KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (De Lillo et al., 2007).

factor distinguishes young participants not interested in saving money from those who, instead, organize social activities within the group. Subsequent cluster analysis allowed us to define three groups of GAS participants on the basis of homogeneous characteristics (Table 3):

Table 3 - Clusters of GAS participants in Sicily.

Factors	Cluster		
	1	2	3
Motivation	.792	-.407	.453
Intensity of participation	.485	-.246	.188
Socio-economic characteristics	.160	.085	-.228
Purchase characteristics	.618	.130	-.745
Age-related attitude	.557	-.291	-.320

First cluster: political consumers

The first cluster accounts for 38.7% of the sampled GAS participants and is mainly characterized by the first, second, fourth and fifth extracted components. Consumers in this group show deep concern in the ethical and environmental aspects of food consumption, even though their consumption experience in GAS are associated to really pragmatic motivations such as food safety and perception of savings by buying organic products at the GAS. This group shows a good attitude to participatory activities, defined through the scores of the second and fifth factors. Consumers in this group are willing to experience creative forms of belonging and conviviality. With regard to socio-economic characteristics, households in this group mainly consist of four members, benefiting from an above-average income as they have two sources of earnings. This group pays considerable attention to organic labelling and certification of origin, and the household share of spending on organic food is significant higher than in other clusters.

Second cluster: pragmatic consumers

This group accounts for almost 25% of respondents. It includes young participants expressing minimal concerns towards

ethical and social aspects of consumption. Participants are also not very involved in activities and services provided by the GAS. Individuals pay attention to organic labelling and certification of origin, and the household share of spending on organic food is higher than in other clusters. This group consists primarily of young participants who join not for political or social motivations but essentially commercial factors: the perception of organic products at competitive prices compared to traditional distribution channels drive the consumers of this group to belong to GASs.

Third cluster: ideological consumers

The third cluster includes 36% of respondents; it is positively characterized by the first component, and negatively by the third, fourth and fifth components. This group includes young and low-income participants, expressing great concern towards political consumerism factors and social activities provided by GASs. The group includes shoppers with the highest frequency of purchases in GAS but at the same time their overall expenditure is lower than average. These individuals are also not very interested in either the local origin or the organic certification of the products they purchase.

In this group, therefore, the lack of attention of such consumers to local and organic products suggest a profile of young people whose political consumerism appears immature.

Conclusion

Multivariate data analysis provided by this study led to initial profiling of consumer group participants in GASs in Sicily. The GAS is an emerging form of a food community network. It is one of the new players in the postmodern society since the purchases of food products in a GAS are significantly driven by the prevalence of participants' altruistic and non-marketable concerns. Typically, GAS participants are not always active in the group, they pay attention to product prices, but their choices seem primarily geared to meeting other requirements. High consumer satisfaction is chiefly linked to those elements that allow individuals to play an active role in a broader social project.

The GAS phenomenon is really complex, and within the same consumer group there may be different perceptions of sustainability of the agro-food and belonging to the group. The participatory system found in GAS is a unique case in several respects among the many observable forms of responsible consumerism. Its uniqueness lies mainly in the spontaneity of the group's origin and in the self-governance system. One might almost state that consumers not only express the most recent instances on the sustainability of the agro-food system, but when the market is not yet ready to satisfy their demands, consumers are able to organize institutional forms that may fulfil their complex needs, less tied to the mere accumulation of goods. With informal-type contracts, consumers get guarantees that exceed existing quality certification systems generally in use.

Direct relationships based on mutual understanding and solidarity and driven by shared ethics establish greater responsibility between the GAS groups and local farms that are also supported in economic terms. Long-term analysis of these forms of association, which in some cases are joined by farmers and their

families, may provide important insights into the needs expressed by GAS participants, facilitating the stability of the wide network of relations between GASs and farms, benefiting both actors.

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