

# Study finds consumers persistently escalate purchases of organic products

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'Once you've purchased your first organic product, you're not likely to stop. You'll continue and over time, you'll increase your organic shopping list. And you'll even be following a rather predictable consumption pattern,' says Professor John Thøgersen, at Aarhus BSS. Credit: Lise Balsby, Aarhus University

Once you've bought your first organic milk in the supermarket, you are

highly likely to continue buying organic milk. With time, you are also likely to increase the number of organic food types on your shopping list. This is the result of new research from Aarhus BSS in which researchers monitored the daily shopping habits of almost 10,000 households over a period of 20 months, producing and analyzing a huge amount of data.

"In connection with organic consumption, there has previously been talk of an 'organic staircase' in the sense that consumers are generally buying certain organic products before others. But our research shows that in fact, we're dealing with an escalator where the upward movement is taking place automatically. Once you've purchased your first organic product, you're not likely to stop. You'll continue, and over time, you'll increase your organic shopping list. And you'll even be following a rather predictable consumption pattern," says Professor John Thøgersen, the Department of Management at Aarhus BSS. He conducted the study together with Professor in Economics Hans Jørn Juhl and PhD student Morten H.J. Fenger from the Department of Economics and Business Economics. The study has recently been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

In Denmark, milk represents the typical entry into organic consumption. But milk is not the organic product with the greatest market share. Oatmeal is. However, in terms of volume, milk is by far the main organic product.

Once a consumer starts buying organic dairy products, they have paved the way for adding more organic products to their [shopping list](#). The typical consumption pattern is that consumers go from dairy products to vegetables, eggs and baking ingredients until they are consistently buying organic products.

"What's interesting is that something is making the organic consumers

stick to their guns. Something is making them stand fast. Our study doesn't tell us anything about why this is the case, but if we include our knowledge from previous research in the area, we're able to make an educated guess," says John Thøgersen, who studies and teaches consumer behaviour. He says that buying organic products is connected to our perception of ourselves as moral human beings. Once people establish that connection, it tends to persist.

Previous studies have thus shown that sustainability and environmental protection are some of the positive aspects that most consumers associate with organic products. "It becomes a way in which we define ourselves. As a result, we build an identity around the notion of buying organic products, and we're highly unlikely to suddenly change our moral values," says John Thøgersen.

Within behavioural research, this phenomenon is known as a behavioural "spillover" effect, which stands in contrast to the well-known phenomenon of "moral licensing." The latter deals with how we as people allow ourselves to become less moral once we have performed one moral act.

"We're not questioning that moral licensing exists, but our study shows that in practise, it doesn't apply to our ethical or pro-environmental behaviour. Once a person has decided to do good, he or she will actually be even more likely to continue to do good," says John Thøgersen.

The Danish supermarket giant Coop Danmark provided the data for the Aarhus BSS researchers and Head of CSR Thomas Roland is thrilled with the results. Here, the results can be used to target the marketing of [organic products](#) to specific customer segments. This is a way of speeding up the organic escalator.

"In reality, we can use a number of different staircases or escalators.

Based on the researchers' analyses, we have been able to establish a number of organic consumer segments. We conducted a test in which we exposed each of the segments to specific marketing messages. This has increased the organic consumption significantly in these customer groups," explains Thomas Roland. He sees great opportunities in analysing customers' actual purchasing patterns rather than relying on more traditional consumer analyses that are often based on attitude measurement.

"This analysis provides us with a mapping of the level and segments that [consumers](#) belong to right now. This is achieved by taking point of departure in the actual shopping patterns and then targeting our marketing accordingly. It could also be interesting to explore whether the same staircases and escalators apply to unbranded products e.g. local high-quality products," says Thomas Roland.

**More information:** Hans Jørn Juhl et al, Will the Consistent Organic Food Consumer Step Forward? An Empirical Analysis, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucx052](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx052)

Provided by Aarhus University

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