Do consumers care about where they buy organic products? A means-end study with evidence from Italian data*.

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Abstract. *The paper presents partial results from a European study on consumer motivations and perception of organic food, using the means-end theory and laddering.*

The means-end chain model (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988[13]) gives the possibility to explicitly link product attributes to consumers needs and wants. This theory stands on associations: between concrete product attributes, abstract product attributes, functional consequences, psychological consequences, instrumental and terminal values. As a result, products attributes are means for consumer to obtain desired ends: consumers achieve values through benefits yielding self relevant product attributes.

In order to explore the relevant cognitive structures of consumers regarding the place of purchase of organic food, 104 respondents were interviewed using the soft-laddering technique, an in-depth face-to face interviewing approach at measuring means-end chains. Consumers where interviewed in various part of Italy, and vary according to their gender, age, frequency of purchase of organic products, level of knowledge of organic products, and residence (rural vs. urban).

The results (ladders) of this semi-qualitative interviews are coded and presented in a set of hierarchical structured value maps (HVMs). The results are discussed and analysed, using insights from previous research.

Keywords: means-end chain theory; laddering; organic food; point of sale; shop preferences.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2002 the Italian organic market is estimated worth around 1400 millions euro and a 1,5% share of the whole food market turnover[6]. The growth rate of the organic demand in Italy is about 5-15% per year, and the Italian organic market is estimated to be the third largest in value in the EU, after Germany and UK. About 80% of organic consumption is localized in northern Italy and it is mainly directed on fruit and vegetables (38%) and dairy products (14%)[18]. In 2002 the number of specialised

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organic shops were 1,117, 65% of them located in the North and only 37 (3,3%) in the south, that is in areas where the production is more concentrated[2].

However, the largest share of the boom that is affecting the organic demand can be ascribed to developments in large scale retailing: almost all the most important supermarket chains have introduced a full range of organic products during the end of last century. Organic products are put on the shelves of 95% of supermarkets and many of them (namely Coop, Esselunga, Carrefour, Conad, Crai, Despar, Pam, Billa and Selex) have their own private label for organic products. Such tendency is going to be strengthened by further developments in the marketing of some product categories, like meat, which probably will have a remarkable impact on the organic consumption.

Supermarkets too, especially those selling fruit and vegetables, are more concentrated in northern Italy[7].

On the consumer side, surveys show that the level of product awareness of organic food is relatively high (90%[17]), while the level of information and product knowledge is still quite low even among organic consumers: there is still a lack of information about product's characteristics, certification bodies, labels, etc.

All recent surveys [20], [21] reveal that consumers ask for more information. They want to chose with more freedom, and knowledge is an instrument, but they are also interested in more "natural" products: certification and labelling are seen as a starting point, food safety is a desirable target, but most of all they desire to understand and to be aware about how organic production and processing is indeed different from the conventional one, and how organic products can be distinguished. Lower prices and better distribution, of course, would help to increase the demand of organic products. At the same time, potential organic consumers want good tasting products as well as easy-to-use products which aren't perishable. In terms of product development, better packaging and organoleptic quality standards appear to be a target for organic farmers and processors.

Organic consumers do not want to be driven by the market, they want to eat healthy and at the same time are not keen to renounce to the pleasures of life. The "health" issue is clearly the key-word to this respect, but it should be coupled with implicit reference to value states such as hedonism, pleasure and achievement, which also act as driving forces.

Although a number of researches have identified organic consumers preferences and barriers and shown the state of the organic sector into the modern distribution of food, no study has examined the links between organic store attributes and the consumer store perception.

Previous store-perception researches[8] have also shown that food stores have some peculiarities respect to other type of stores: when purchasing food, consumers usually perceive that store attributes such as location, assortment, price level, personnel and services offered exercise a consistent influence on store choice, while, among product attributes, perceived food quality is quite important.

The dynamic nature of food buyers renders all the aspects mentioned unstable over time: consumers change needs and motivations when going for food purchases[8]. To this respect, food scandals and other similar emotionally impacting occurrences may not be durable drives in motivating organic food consumption.

There are therefore remarkably many black spots of the organic market that should be analysed by researchers in order to help retailers to understand consumers and developing a successful positioning and increase their loyalty rates.

1.1. Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to gain further insight into consumers' store perception with regard to organic food products, in Italy. More specifically, the study aimed at evaluating and getting information about: perceived barriers and motivations, possible differences in consumers' cognitive structures relating to different socio-demographics groups, some regional/national differences in beliefs and attitudes towards different retail typologies.

2. Methodology

2.1. Means-end chains and laddering

The empirical work on which the study is based refers to means-end theory[4],[13] , a conceptual model which studies underlying consumer purchase choices trough the deep comprehension of the consumer decision-making processes.

This cognitive methodological approach starts from the analysis of the existing linkage between the consumer and the product. The basic idea of this approach is that when a stimulus or event regarding a product (including new products information) come in relation with consumer self-knowledge and his memory, a link between him and the product is built. A network of links between product attributes, personal consequences and values can be revealed to give a deeper insight in consumer motivation. Individual association, that consumer formulate, can be collected and structured in a hierarchical form known as a "means-end chain"[4]. In other words a means-end chain (MEC) is a knowledge structure that links consumer knowledge about product attributes with his/her personal knowledge about consequences and values (Figure 1).

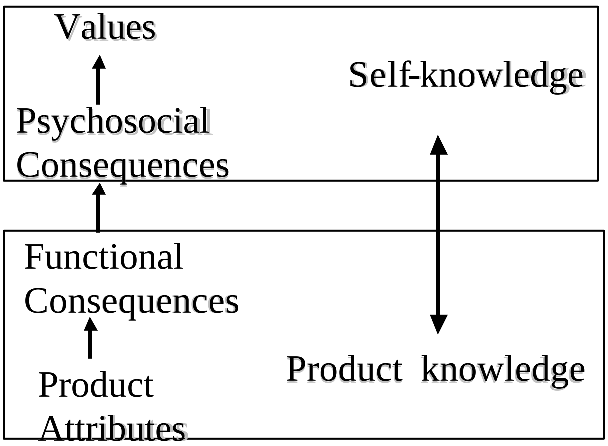

Figure 1 - Linking values to products: the Means-End Chain Model

By the gradual collection of information on consumers goals, aims and motivations/barriers to the product/service use, the Means-End Chain (MEC) approach tries to describe the existing level of familiarity with the product/service, but also to show the links between the consumer's knowledge about product attributes and product-related outcomes with his/her personal knowledge about self-relevant consequences and values.

Connections between consumer and product occurs through the construction of an associative network between concrete and abstract attributes of the product, functional and psychological consequences tied to the product use, and, finally, the consumer's instrumental and final values. The final result of this theoretical model, is constituted of a series of *cognitive maps* (Hierarchical Value Maps o HVM)[13] depicting the aggregate consumer means-end chains, linking the product characteristics with consumer's ethic and values.

By looking at Hierarchical Value Maps it is possible to discover what motivate consumers to choose a product, in our case a shop, rather than something else. The model gives a more deep view into consumer perception, revealing characteristics consumers judge more important in their choice and linking them into a model of sequential motivations. In this model, product attributes are *means* which consumers can take advantage of in order to achieve their own aims/*ends*; in other words, consumers attain their own life goals, by means of those product's characteristics they perceive being important and producing suitable consequences to satisfy their own personal values.

Information on the means-end chains – either motivations or barriers – contained into consumers mind cannot be obtained by *direct asking*, as it usually happens in most of consumer surveys, both quantitative than qualitative (focus groups). In most of the cases consumers are not aware of their decision-making process, nor able to reveal the reasons that personally motivate consumers to choose a product/service and links these motivations to product attributes and their consequences. A specific in-depth interviewing technique, named *laddering*, can be used to reveal respondents true beliefs, feelings and desired ends.

To extract consumer relevant product attributes/characteristics, direct elicitation or various other techniques can be used (triadic sorting, free-sorting, ranking, etc.). Afterwards, the most important product attributes are retained for laddering. Consumers are asked to build their means-end chains, that is their own sequences attribute-consequence-value, just repeating an iterative simple question (*Why this is important for you?*) or variations of such question[13]. In this way interviewer speeds up connections between the various elements of the chain and consumers are driven to build up their ladders. The development of such procedure allows the consumer to naturally reveal his personal reasons, those motivating him to choose and that otherwise it would not be in a position to bringing back to the light from the memory. The technique has, in fact, the advantage to force consumer to reflect and reason about attribute-consequence-value relations.

2.2. Study design and data collection

A total of 104 interviews have been conducted in Italy during a period which goes from February to April 2002.

Both consumers and non consumers of organic products have been interviewed, in similar quotas: 51% declare themselves as regular buyers of organic food and 49% as occasional or non-buyers of organic food[1]. In order to compare different types of consumers, potential respondents were recruited in three main areas of the Italian territory. Approximately half of the respondents (54%) were interviewed in Central Italy (Marches) and the remaining 46% of the sample was shared between a northern region (Veneto) and a southern one (Apulia). Consumers were also recruited in different percentages considering their area of residence: approximately 65% lived in urban areas (Lecce, Ancona or Padova), while the remaining lived in rural areas.

Among the respondents, 41% declare to make most of their (organic) food purchases at the supermarket, 39% prefer to buy in organic specialised shops, while the remaining are consumers that buy organic food in open air markets. The phenomenon of small, open-air farmer markets**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.** is not to be considered as a real alternative to other retail channels, because of their small dimension, very sparse distribution and – with few exceptions – irregular frequency. However, the group of consumers preferring open-air markets for their organic purchases shows some peculiarities.

Data on consumer means-end chain were collected empirically by means of face-to-face ("soft") laddering interviews[2]. In order to uncover what personally motivate consumers to choose a specific point of sale rather than another consumer were asked to give reasons for shop preference and/or shop refusal and links these motivations to product attributes and their consequences to reveal respondents true beliefs, feelings and desired ends.

Once collected all the interviews were transcribed by professional type-writers. Subsequently, the interviewers decoded them in chunks of meaning, and listed in ladder forms following the iterative coding procedure suggested by Reynolds and Gutman[13] to reveal ladders made of linkages between attributes-consequences-values. Using a set of codes jointly developed, two independent judges carried out the classification process for all the laddering interviews. The index of reliability[10] was 0.72, exceeding the recommended guideline (inter-rater-reliability = 0.70). All disagreements were resolved by discussion. From only 96 consumers, for shop preferences, and 55 for shop refusal, out the 104 interviewed, it was

[1] The national survey is part of a large EU study (OMIaRD) which involves other 7 EU countries: Austria, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland. The laddering study has been developed to gain more insights into the European organic consumer, together with focus groups conducted in the same countries. For a full account of the research results and discussion[21].

[2] "Soft" laddering is a procedure where the natural flow of speech of the respondent is restricted as little as possible, as in a face-to-face interview; "hard" laddering refers to interviews and data collection techniques where the respondents is forced to produce ladders one by one, and to give answers at an increasing level of abstraction .

possible to extract meaningful ladders and categories of meaning. The coding for organic shop preferences results in a list of 47 categories, shop refusal's categories are 53.

The software MECanalyst, developed by the Authors[3], was used to derive the implication matrixes and the relevant HVMs for both the aggregate group of consumers and each relevant subgroup (regular vs. occasional buyers; urban vs. rural; income levels; levels of product knowledge; consumers with children aged less than 10 vs. consumers with no or older children).

3. Results

Results are to be analysed in the light of the recent increase of the organic range in supermarkets and modern distribution channels in Italy. Multiple retailers engagement into the organic sector is currently reducing the market share of specialised organic shops, albeit not the overall volume sold by these outlets[17]. However, consumers have different perceptions about different outlets, specialised shops offering more in terms of "service" and information than supermarkets[7]. This may influence the trust and confidence of consumers towards organic products.

3.1. Where do Italian consumers buy

The aggregate HVM of all respondents is presented in Figure 2 and 3 by distinguishing the shop preferences and shop refusal ladders. The first map shows the means-end chains listed by at least 7 respondents (cutoff=7), the second those listed by at least 5 (cutoff=5)[4]. The codes in the top of the maps (in **bold**) representing the consumers final motivations or values, are linked by arrows coming from the lower levels: consumer benefits or positive consequences (in CAPITAL LETTERS), and product's attributes (in *italic*) at the bottom. Each code block contains the code label, the number of chunks it represents and the percentage of subjects that have named it. Bolder arrows refer to links mentioned by a larger number of respondents.

A first inspection of the map reveals a quite complex cognitive structure. The average length of ladders is 6.5, the number of ladders per subject is 4.9 and the value codes share of total number of codes is 21,3%. The five value codes are all imputable to the self-enhancement or egotistic domain, according to the Schwartz's classification[15], except one: *Harmony with the world*, which can be classified as an altruistic or self-transcendent value. This structure confirms previous results on the higher importance of self-enhancement and openness to change in the Italian organic consumer decision making processes.

Although all the consumers appear to be driven by a unique motivational framework, subjects declare that the preferred place to shop organic products is, in preference order: supermarket, mentioned by 44% of consumers, organic shop (35%) and local shops in fewer cases. The results confirm that the modern distribution is the preferential purchase outlet for all the consumers, as expected from previous surveys[5]. This aspect is also confirmed looking at the consumers cognitive structure. By simply looking at the map one can appreciate that there are two main segments of shoppers, with two different motivational structures: purchasers at the supermarket and at the specialised organic shop. The two sections of the map are quite different, but have the same "leverage point" in *Feel good*. For both groups of consumers, this consequence is the bridge connecting various ladders to the value level. When looking at maps with higher level of cut-offs, respondents seems to admit their desire for independence – see also the link *Have choice* ✍ *Self-actualisation* – and to be considered a competent/capable housewife to reach higher levels of satisfaction and be happy. The two shopping outlets permit to obtain this advantages in different ways: at the supermarket the product assortment and convenient location contribute to time saving, at the organic shop consumers can improve their knowledge and information thanks to "advisory" services given by sales personnel.

[3] MecAnalyst is a windows-based laddering software developed jointly by Skymax-DG, R. Zanoli, S. Naspetti, E. Thelen and M. Botschen (http://www.skymax-dg.com/mecanalyst/index.html).
[4] In order to obtain a balance between quantitative validity of the data and aesthetic of the map, different cut-offs have been used for the two analyses trying to keep similar percentages of mapped links on total links (at least 57,7% for shop preferences and 52,2% for shop refusals). Different cut-off levels are going to be taken into account when interpreting the results and evaluating the complexity of the maps.

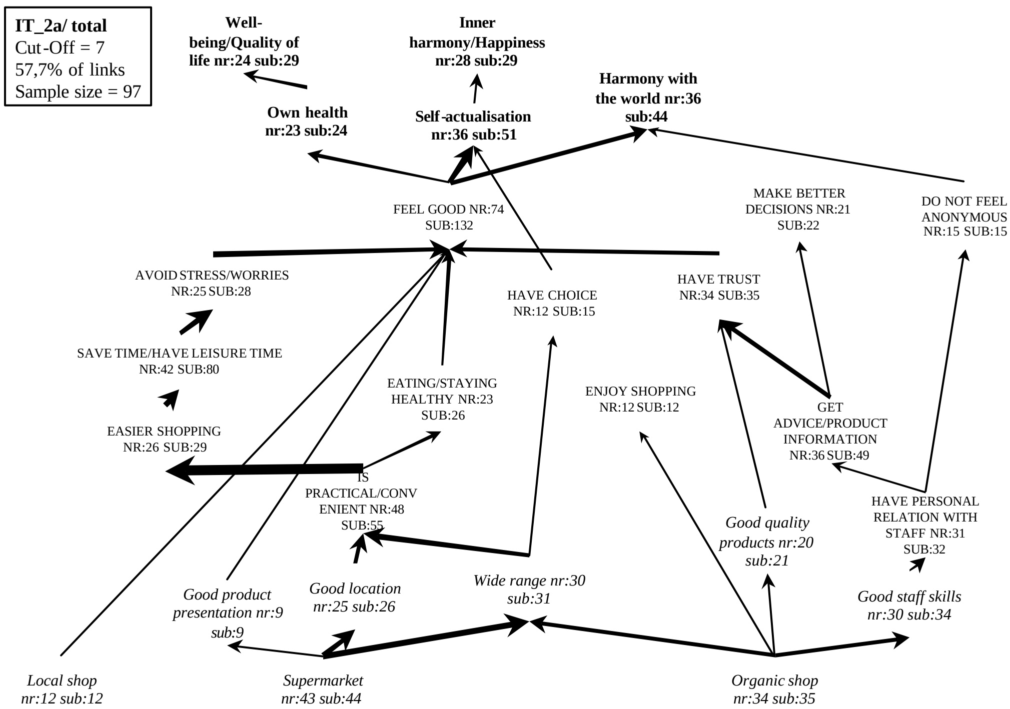

Figure 2 - HVM of motivations for preferred point of sales

The altruistic value *Harmony with the world* is achieved in a slightly different way by the two consumers subgroups. Supermarket buyers refer to the possibility of improving their relations by having time for social activities, those going into the organic shop refer to a generalized feeling of trust they obtain during shopping by the relationships they activate with sales personnel giving them advice and information. Both groups report that this value is linked with the *Feel good* psychosocial consequence, which – as already illustrated – is central in the cognitive map of all respondents and is related with a general feeling of personal and social well-being. But the "organic shop freaks" group achieve the same value in another – more direct – way, by the psychosocial benefit of *Not feeling anonymous*, linked with the higher service embedded in the personal selling attitude of organic shop's salespersons.

The *Harmony with the world* value acquires more importance for the subgroup of regular consumers. Compared to the reasons which move non regular buyers, the motivations of regular organic consumers are less egocentric; and regular consumers declare that they mainly prefer to shop in organic specialised shops. Confirming the findings of our previous studies[20][19], frequent users continue to have a more idealistic cognitive structure than occasional consumers, and this may be considered a symptom of a higher involvement.

The goal of living an healthy life (*Own health*), which is also linked with the value which represents a quality of life improvement (*Well-being, Quality of life*), is equally present in both the consumers preferring the supermarket and those who go for the specialised shop. Concerns about the health risk from food consumption is central in the cognitive structure of all consumers, no matter which is their preferred point of sale.

As demonstrated in previous studies, the simplicity of the motivational structure for purchase at the supermarket indicates the consumer's lower involvement into product choice[16]. This group of shoppers choose a supermarket because of convenience and for some practical reasons: product assortment (*wide range*) and location convenience (*good location*), which in the consumers mind represent a practical and comfortable way of shopping (*is practical/convenient*). Supermarkets facilities provide an easier shopping for the increasing number of time-impoverished consumers and also more leisure time to avoid anxieties and feel better. The array of increasing offerings in the supermarket, plus the accessibility, that is the distance of shops from home or work, make them a convenient place for their food purchases.

Those preferring organic shops are mainly driven by more emotional motivations. They show many cognitive links that are similar to those buying in supermarkets, but the main link leading up to *Harmony with the world* illustrate the importance of altruistic motivations for these shoppers. In fact, if we increase the cut-off level[5], the motivations show a more affective attitude than those of the supermarket-lovers. Subjects selecting these shops, because more oriented to altruistic values, show a more complex network of motivations but also have shorter chains. This two element emphasise the importance of the food choice into consumers lives[6], but as well suggest the lower familiarity they have with this kind of shop[12]. Since the organic shop is mainly chosen by regular consumers[7], it is possible to assume that they do not exhibit a high store loyalty[8] even if they have a more detailed knowledge of the store attributes: in other words, regular consumers show a higher shop expertise. While preferring the organic shop, they do not disdain the supermarket whenever it solves their need for a practical, comfortable, and time-saving way of shopping.

Regular consumers seem to place the two shop types side by side, and attribute positive qualities to both, as explained above, but then differentiate between the two. Occasional consumers display a clearer choice. Their preference for supermarkets is more evident (64% vs. 28% for the regular organic consumers); the choice is motivated by a salient belief that they can find better quality products in supermarkets and thus have a better diet and better health – "with products which are not deteriorated, I eat more genuine". At the value level, we may have a confirmation of this result by acknowledging the presence of the *Health* value, that is absent in the regular consumers map.

Regular and occasional organic buyers interpret the ease of finding a wide range of organic products in a different way. Probably due to a different attitude towards food purchases, regular consumers seem to appreciate the *width* and *length* of the range offered by organic shops (i.e. the number of different product lines and the total number of organic products available), while occasional consumers value the possibility of choice existing in supermarkets: in other words, they like the fact that organic brands are positioned side by side with other non-organic brands, increasing their freedom of choice. Regular consumers, searching for a wider number of product lines, seem more *pleasure oriented*. Their behavioral response to the store is mostly exploratory and relational [11], and they seem to be looking for an intrinsic enjoyment of their shopping experience: they express interest in friendliness of personnel, service and food quality and, according to their cognitive structure, seem less pressed by time.

Specialized shops, with competent and involved sales people (*good staff skills*), grant to these consumers a great variety of advantages, both concrete and psychological. Skilled staff, trying to be friendly and helpful, is important for two reasons: it is a mean to *have (good) personal relations* with sales staff, since they can give *advice and product information*, but also they make the consumers *feel less anonymous* as it happens when going into supermarkets. When sales personnel advise consumers about products characteristics, usage, origin and other information, they make them feel more confident about their choices (*Make better decisions*), and act as trust builders (*have trust*) that create the shop loyalty. Consumers experience a pleasant and relaxed feeling, or a sense of home and familiarity.

Both urban and rural consumers express a dominant preference for supermarkets and are especially interested in convenience and choice offered by them, but are differentiated by looking at their final motivational stance (driving force): *self-actualisation* for the urban group and *inner harmony, happiness* for the rural one. It seems as if rural consumers are willing to find a trade-off between their mainly concrete motivations and the desire of a serene and spiritual life. They even do not want to give up the benefits offered by modern distribution channels as well as those offered by organic shops (the same mentioned in the total map). In the name of balance, they seek life's comforts keeping in mind that life should stay on a human scale. Those living in small urban centres, where the presence of organic specialised shops and organic supermarket shelves is to be considered still marginal compared to large city centres, are probably still affectionate to local traditional small food shops, which for years have been offering the same level of advice as organic shops are currently offering elsewhere.

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5 The map is not shown here for simplicity, but is available by request from the Authors.

6 More complex structures are proof of higher involvement of the organic shopper group[2].

7 At the subgroup level, separate maps were derived choosing groups with different socio-demographic characteristics. By comparing maps is possible to observe similarity and divergences between the cognitive structures of the groups. Subgroups maps are not shown here: they are available upon request from the Authors.

Urban shoppers have no doubts: supermarket is their favourite place, but they express this preference with a nested structure. Supermarkets are reported as exhibiting advantages normally attributed to organic shops, in addition to the other benefits usually linked to them. In fact, the map of urban consumers introduces many interrelations, as if to express a dual need. Although consumers demand high quality standards for conventional products that big supermarket chains usually offers, they also have a need for the level of service associated with smaller shops. In neither group are consumers willing to give up the benefits they associate with each of the different store types.

Both groups mention the trust issue as a positive aspect inferred by the possibility of getting help and advice, but the ladder stops at the psychosocial consequence, without attaining the value level. This probably means that consumers feel that having confidence in quality and in staff knowledge is not as important as other benefits. Consumer preferences for more concrete advantages such as saving time and obtaining information are more self-relevant, i.e. reach the value level. We can also hypothesise that both groups take such aspect for granted and therefore do not particularly ask for it.

Comparing consumers with low declared income (39,6%) with those with medium or high income (59,3%) reveals that the last group favours neither supermarkets nor specialised shops, whereas low income respondents express a clear preference for supermarkets. Contrary to the findings of our previous studies[20][19], specialised shops are not chosen by consumers with lower incomes. An explanation of this result can be due to adverse selection of respondents in the sample, and not simply ascribed to a lower price perception, which in any case is not appearing in the map.

By evaluating organic product knowledge level (or *expertise*[8]) two maps have been created: consumers with high knowledge and those with low or medium expertise. The more informed consumers are also those usually preferring the organic shop (mentioned by 40% of the more knowledgeable respondents vs. a 24% elicitation rate of the less expert group). And visual inspection of the subgroup maps renders clear that the less expert and informed consumers have a simpler cognitive structure regarding shopping at the organic specialised shop. Less expertise/knowledge about organic *products* is therefore coupled with lower frequentations of organic *specialised shops.*

In conclusion, supermarkets are frequented by a wider group of consumers who appreciate the various advantages they offer but are mainly interested in saving time, leading to *Self-actualisation*. Organic specialised shops are usually appreciated by the same buyers, but are especially suited to regular consumers, working full-time, with medium-high level education and high organic product knowledge. Specialised shops are linked to more social values and to the pleasant feeling of establishing friendly relationships with the staff, in the words of one consumer , “a sort of friendship”.

Consumer interest in purchasing organic food in open air markets or directly from farmers is totally absent. Lack of time seems to be the main barrier for shopping in these places. Small farmer markets are therefore very marginal as marketing channels. However, these markets seem to provide an occasion for trying new products[9].

3.2. Shop refusal

In spite of the increasing interest of modern retail channels in distributing organic products, consumers show a remarkable level of mistrust towards these point of sales when organic purchases are concerned. Reasons put forward for not buying in supermarkets seem to contrast with the preference consumers credit them with, but help to understand in more depth the dynamics of consumer shop preference.

It is therefore not that surprising that supermarkets, usually the preferred shopping place for organic products, receive the worst judgment. Supermarket refusal is mentioned by 40% of shoppers, while 15% mention discount shops as the point of sale they will never choose in order to buy organic products. Other miscellaneous point of sales (e.g. drugstores, confectionery shops, etc.) are mentioned by another 15% of respondents. All types of shops display a negative image based on the presence of *poor quality products*, leading to the health issue, and on the *unpleasant atmosphere* experienced. *Health* is again the main motivational domain for store refusal. According to respondents, supermarkets are crowded, chaotic and

[8] Consumer’s *knowledge* was estimated measuring the *effective* knowledge through a 7-item scale previously tested in a past study[20] .
[9] Data on “Special situations for buying organic” are not shown but available upon request from the Authors.

noisy places, while discount shops are untidy and dirty; their outward appearance reduces consumer confidence (*have no trust*). Trust in the quality of the products also depends on two factors: doubt about the honesty of supermarkets (*strict controls*) that sell unknown brands, which may not respect organic standards or do not display certification, and the risk of buying "false" organic products. Discount shops are also criticized for their bad products presentation.

The absence of skilled staff in supermarkets and discounts may induce an avoidance behaviour in consumers, connected with a lack of pleasure in shopping and a negative arousal response to the store atmosphere[11]. Less interactions with personnel means less product information and consumers distrust for products sold in these shops.

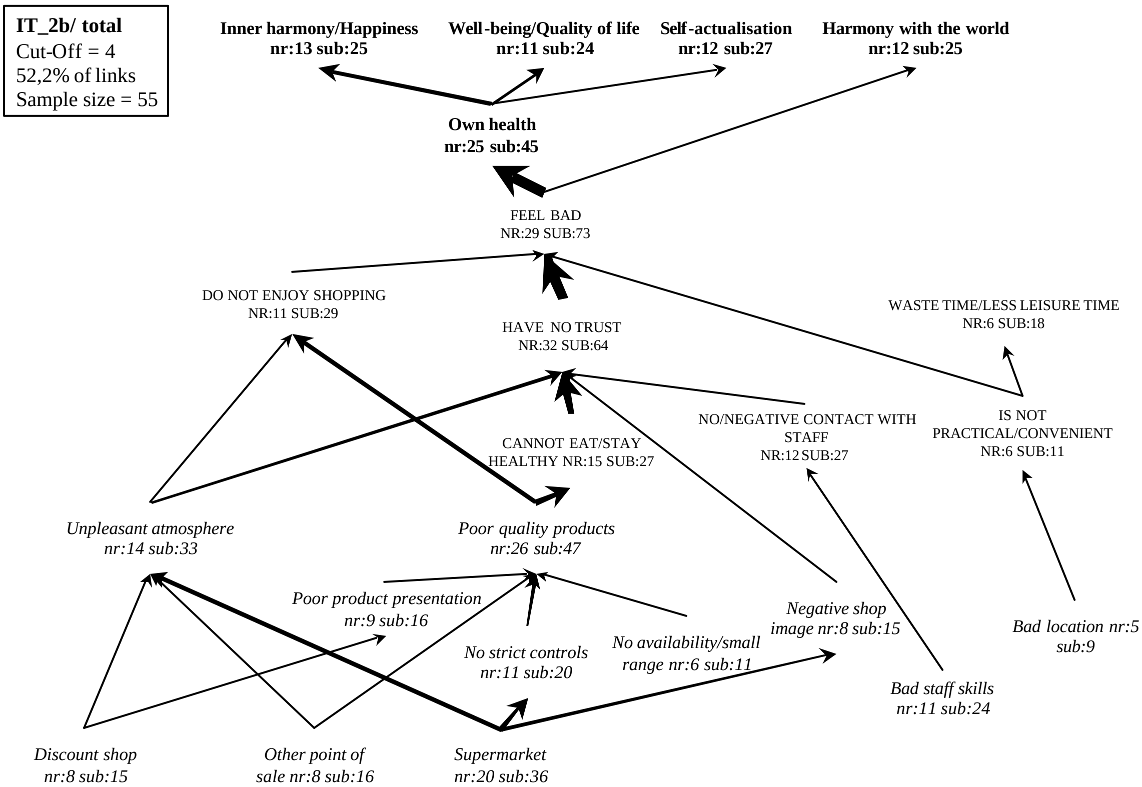

Figure 3 – HVM of shops where consumers prefer not to buy organic products

Consumers food concerns (*cannot eat, stay healthy*) is another cause of mistrust. Given that shoppers indicate their uneasiness about this issue, safety of food is very important when shopping organic products whatever the shopping place is. But respondents seem to be reluctant to support mass-market structures, mainly for reasons that are linked with their main motivations – *health* and *well-being*, but also serenity and *happiness*. The same benefits that are at the basis of the success of supermarkets (e.g. self-service, large assortments, lower handling costs) appear to be, in the mind of the Italian consumers, potential risk bearers.

Respondents restate their wish for competent staff who can be of help and give information as a way of building trust, and reiterate the convenience of being able to shop quickly to reach their ultimate goals through an easy, pleasant, and – above all – relaxed feeling. Shopping is usually perceived as a stressful activity, which is combined with busy working days. What consumers want is tranquillity.

Supermarket are mainly rejected by regular consumers (55%), whereas only 21% of occasional consumers say no to supermarkets for their organic purchases. Regular consumers express their concern for supermarkets mainly in terms of mistrust. The verbatim expression literally is: "in supermarkets I do not trust the organic origin of the product". The quality perception is again the main – albeit often latent – variable influencing consumer attitudes. Occasional consumers confirm their lower level of experience with respect to shop refusal too; their map is more dispersed and expressing a more undetermined cognitive structure.

Low income respondents are the only group showing an important refusal of discount shops; 27% of them mention it as a disliked outlet, while it is not even mentioned by the other income categories, who probably don't even consider discounts as a potential organic point of sale. Low income respondents are, of course, more experienced in shopping at discounts, which appear clearly a second-best in their cognitive understanding: going into those shops they have had the possibility to come into contact with the unpleasant atmosphere which cause their avoidance behaviour. Consumers with higher incomes are definitely less experienced with this specific type of outlets and, showing a more complex cognitive structure, tend to refuse supermarkets which may be seen as relative counterparts of discounts for their income category.

In general, visual analysis of the map reveals a simpler cognitive structure than that exhibited in Figure 2. The average length of ladders is 6.6 – substantially equal to that exhibited by the shop preference HVM; the number of ladders per subject is significantly lower – just 3.4, while the share of value codes over total number of codes is 22,7%, a bit higher than in the shop preference case. This allow to conclude that the level of involvement of consumers is more or less the same for both motivations and barriers, but the shop refusal cognitive structure is less articulated.

4. Discussion

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that different shopping situations activate very different aspects in consumers self-cognition system. The study suggest that supermarkets are perceived as less involving because they activate a smaller amount of important linkages than the organic specialised shops do, and those consumers familiar with organic shops seem to have a more idealistic cognitive structure than occasional consumers, and this may be considered a symptom of a higher emotional participation in food choice.

The organic consumer, wishing to buy quality products – healthy, natural and genuine, also ask for a convenient shopping activity and for products easy to use and find[20]. Occasional consumers appear driven by practical motivations, rational thought and common sense. Supermarkets is their favourite place for organic food purchases, but they are doubtful about the organic quality of the goods sold, they feel they have no real guarantee. Improvements on this aspects could help development of the organic supply in modern retail stores. Supermarkets, on the whole, exhibit a positive image in the eyes of regular consumers too, but the need of getting advice and obtain information, coupled with the idea of having more human relation when shopping, limits the appeal of this shopping places. Specific marketing efforts, aimed at increasing the relational content of the shopping experience, would therefore act as trust enhancers. A low level of *trust* (leverage point in the shop refusal HVMs) is indeed the psycosocial constraint to increase the share of organic purchases in modern distribution channels.

On the other hand, organic shops show constraints which, on the contrary, could be hardly solved. The small dimension of these places, but mostly their inconvenient location and the lack of parking facilities make them less convenient places for shopping and reduce their competitiveness into the organic distribution channel. However their strengths should be better emphasized by the shopkeepers by putting more commitment in the shop atmosphere. Findings suggest that shopping into organic shops is perceived as more self-relevant than going into a supermarket. Stores full of life and surprises develop a more positive emotional response and have the opportunity to induce pleasant psychosocial benefits in the consumers, increasing their willingness to spend money into the shop and to make unplanned purchases[11]. Given greater involvement and motivation is activated by higher level of consumer self-relevance[3], consumers should be given enough attention and consideration to avoid them feeling anonymous. It is not surprising that salesperson who are able to recognise regular customers and address them by their names if required have a high chance of success. NLP applied to marketing stress the relational factors as the most important in personal selling strategies. A pleasant atmosphere coupled by professional but concerned relations with customers could be the main opportunity for the success (or survival) of organic specialised shops and organic specialised retail chains.

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