



Research article

Providing organic food to urban consumers: case studies of supermarkets in Bangkok and metropolitan area

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to 1) explore the information flow by which supermarkets attempt to communicate with consumers, and 2) make a preliminary evaluation of the strategies used by supermarkets to promote organic food to consumers specifically within the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Nine supermarket outlets located at the headquarters of nine supermarket chains were observed. Eleven informants from four supermarket chains were interviewed. The results found that supermarkets in Thailand provided rich information about organic food via standard certification, a Participatory Guarantee System, storylines and illustrations involving farmers. The retailers attempted to offer organic food in a way that is convenient to urban consumers' lifestyles. However, the retailers did not attempt to offer special discounts or marketing promotions since they believed that the consumers knowledgeable of organic food would be willing to pay premium price. Two valuable recommendations can be drawn from this research. Firstly, the retailers should provide more information about the formal control systems and authenticity of organic food in order to foster trust and to allow consumers to assess its benefits. Secondly, the retailers should continue offering 'ready to eat' organic food since it can be of significance in relation to the lifestyle of urban Thai consumers.

1. Introduction

The globalization of trade has brought about the mass mobilization of food across the world (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, 2012; Wilhelmina et al., 2010). Food supply chains have become extended over long distances of space and time (Marsden, 2011; Spaargaren et al., 2012). Since the origin of food is sometimes unknown to consumers, they feel uncertain about the safety of their food (Ortega and Tschirley, 2017; Richards et al., 2011). This safety concern is compounded by media reports about food-related diseases such as mad cow disease, bird flu, swine flu, and melamine contamination which has increased the consumer perception of riskiness about food (Mitchell et al., 2015; Richards et al., 2011; Steffen and Doppler, 2019; Wang et al., 2015). Because of this increased risk, a global demand has come about whereby consumers desire sustainable foods that are both safe for human health and for the environment (Haghjou et al., 2013; Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2013; Mohamad et al., 2014; Ness et al., 2010). Organic food is one alternative for consumers who wish to avoid health risks from chemical

contamination (Nelson et al., 2019). Besides the health and safety benefits, organic food is also good environmental practice. It also can increase animal welfare and may promote biodiversity (Lindström et al., 2020). Because of these benefits, policy makers in European countries offer support for organic land management (Orsini et al., 2019) and organic food consumption (Azzurra et al., 2019) to enhance sustainability in food systems.

Similar to other countries, the mode of food production and consumption between rural and urban area in Thailand has been separated. Most foods are produced in rural areas and supply consumers in the cities. Since the 1980s, the Thai economy has been restructured from an agriculture-based to an industry-based one relying on industrial production for earning export revenue (Akrasanee and Ajanant, 2017). Farming, in turn, has also become industrialized with commercial agriculture using more and more pesticides each year in order to increase output. Thai farmers are heavy users of pesticides (Jeephet et al., 2016). Thailand is ranked fourth out of 15 Asian countries in annual pesticide use (Panuwet et al., 2012). According to Pinichka et al. (2019), about 35

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million people, or 56%, of Thais were exposed to pesticides in 2017. As a result of this high use, and some concomitant exposures problems, the Thai middle class and educated consumers have become more concerned about food safety (Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2017) and the domestic demand for organic food and safe food has been rapidly increasing (Jiumpanyarach, 2013, 2018).

Any increase in the level of sustainable food consumption requires both providers and consumers to change their behavior and strategies in a more sustainable direction. This study focuses on the provider side. Food retailers can pressure food industry organizations and producers to perform in a more sustainable way because of their economic power (Oosterveer, 2012). Among organic food retailers, supermarkets have become a major distribution channel for organic products in the UK (Orsini et al., 2019), Germany (Paunonen et al., 2019), Denmark (Denver et al., 2019), Australia (Bruno and Phan, 2018), and Brazil (Galindo Curvelo et al., 2019).

There are great number of scholars studying consumers in Thailand covering topics such as consumer perception and attitudes to organic food (Chouichom and Yamao, 2010; Sangkumchaliang and Huang, 2012; Ueasangkomsate and Santiteerakul, 2016), consumer behavior and knowledge of organic food (Arttachariya, 2009; Kongsom and Kongsom, 2016; Vongmahadlek, 2012; Wyatt, 2010), factors driving consumers to buy organic food (Maichum et al., 2017; Pomsanam et al., 2014), consumer trust (Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2017), and 'willingness to pay' for organic products (Sriwaranun et al., 2015). However, the study of organic food providers is still limited. This study contributes to the knowledge of sustainable food consumption in Thailand by improving the understanding of the retailers' strategies in providing organic food to the consumers in Bangkok and metropolitan.

2. Theory

This research used an integrative theory of consumer behavior, so called the "Social Practice Approach (SPA), as the conceptual framework. SPA works under the assumption that consumers are influenced by individual action and systems of provision. Any increase in the level of sustainable food consumption requires both providers and consumers to change their behaviors into more sustainable direction. Retailers possess the power to influence the level of consumption of sustainable food products by offering 'green foods' to consumers. They play a powerful role in creating and expanding the market, because they can also influence other actors, such as farmers and producers, in the supply chain (Oosterveer, 2012). Consumers also have an important role to play since they are able to make use of the sustainable alternatives offered to them by retailers operating in the context of a specific system of provision for sustainable food (Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000).

SPA is used to explore the way in which social actors relate to the many everyday practices in order to reduce environmental impacts (Oosterveer et al., 2007). The Retailers are the leading actors in provisioning sustainable food since they can promote sustainable food consumption and production by adopting different strategies (Oosterveer, 2008). The retailers in this research included supermarkets because they are the main channels in providing organic food to consumers in Bangkok and its' metropolitan area (Kantamaturapoj, 2012). The supermarket floor is a place where consumers' shopping practices can be studied by both macro and micro approaches. The consumer-oriented approaches of retailers in supermarkets should be explored in three levels; i) visual level (the way retailers present products in their outlets, ii) shop floor level (the information they provide to consumers) and iii) product level (the images and narratives they thereby present) (Oosterveer et al., 2014). The shopping floor is a place of interaction between the retailers and various consumers who have different lifestyles, concerns and routines. According to Oosterveer et al. (2014), the transaction of organic food will be successful if the retailer strategies fit with consumers' preferences.

Spaargaren and van Koppen (2009) argued that the providers' strategies to incorporate new ideas, information and products into existing

consumption routines of citizen-consumers can lead to sustainable consumption practice. Thus, this study focuses on supermarket's strategy in providing sustainable food to the consumers. The common strategy of most supermarkets is to providing organic food products in the supermarket; however, the other options are unfamiliar (Oosterveer, 2008).

Supplying organic food products can be seen as embedded in broader retailer-consumer relationships, the social practices perspective can serve as a useful conceptual framework to analyze these transitions to sustainability (Oosterveer et al., 2014). This empirical study contributes to SPA by testing the theory of practice in the developing countries. The strategies of supermarkets in metropolitan Bangkok in providing sustainable food were thusly explored.

3. Material and methods

Thailand, a newly industrialized country in Southeast Asia, was the focus area of this research; specifically, the administrative zone of the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority. A dynamic population change has brought about rapid urbanization in Bangkok and resulted in a rushed transformation of people's lifestyle (Tanaphoom and Bart, 2015) which itself had increased demand for sustainable food products (Charonpanich and Vongurai, 2018).

Supermarket chains providing organic foods in metropolitan Bangkok were selected as the case studies for this research. In 2016, there were 565 outlets of nine supermarket chains in Thailand (Health Society Company Limited, 2018; Ngamprasertkit, 2017; Suvarnachad Company Limited, 2018). The headquarter outlets of nine supermarket chains were selected for observation because these outlets were located at prime areas of Bangkok Metropolitan where urban consumers go for shopping. The methodology was designed based on SPA. SPA is a synthesis between micro and macro approaches in consumer analysis (Spaargaren, 2011); thus the supermarket floor became the focus for this research to study shopping practices while establishing balances and links between the micro level (consumers' lifestyle) and macro-level (retailers' strategies). Observation and in-depth interviews were employed from October to December 2018 to collect data.

The data was collected through participant observation. The shops were visited partly in the role of an interested consumer, looking at how sustainability is framed on the shop floor. Each visit to the selected retail-outlets consisted of three rounds. The observations were conducted in nine supermarket outlets to explore the information flow by which supermarkets attempt to communicate with and inform consumers at the visual level, the shop floor level, and the product level. For the visual level, the research focused on images and impressions regarding sustainability that a customer receives when entering the shop; for examples, the images and words that immediately catch consumers' eyes. For shop floor level, the research focused on the ways that consumers are encouraged to buy sustainable food products. This shop floor level consists mainly of three elements; information about sustainability, ways of drawing attention to sustainable food products, and the promotion of sustainable food products. Information tools, the placement of sustainable food products, information given by the shop personnel and the promotion of sustainable food products are described and presented to convey an impression of sustainability at the shop level. At the product level, the research focused on specific information about the available sustainable products. The information about sustainability on the packages of organic food, for instance, were investigated.

In addition, nine supermarket chains were approached for in-depth interviews; however only four super market chains positively responded to engage in the study. The informants in this study included eleven representatives from four supermarket chains. The informants were, variously, deputy managing directors, fresh food managers, and groceries managers. All informants had worked with the supermarkets for more than 10 years. The duration of each interview was approximately 60 min. The objective of the in-depth interviews was to investigate supermarket strategies in providing organic food products to consumers in Bangkok

and its metropolitan area. The location of the outlets and the details of the interview informants is presented in Table 1.

4. Result

4.1. Result from observation: information flow in the supermarket outlet

Oosterveer et al. (2007) suggested to study shopping practice in three levels; (i) visual level, (ii) shop floor level, and (iii) product level. The result of these three levels observation is presented in the following sections.

4.1.1. Visual level

Wordings associated with sustainability appeared in nine supermarket outlets included quality (C, D, G), freshness (D, E, F), health (C, H, I), food safety (C and D), organic (D and H), community support (C and H), sustainability (C and H), and nature (G).

Besides this, there were some wordings not associated with sustainability; such as value for money (A, B, E), exclusiveness (D, F, I), and convenience (F).

4.1.2. Shop floor level

At the shop floor level, the research explored the location of organic food in the outlets as regarding whether it was presented with prominence. The information offered to the consumers on the shop floor and at shelf was also investigated. Having a specific bespoke presentation corner makes organic food more noticeable and the consumers can easily find organic food in this way in the supermarket. Eight (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H) among a total of nine supermarket outlets had a specific corner for organic vegetables.

Four (B, C, D, H) among a total of nine supermarket outlets had a specific corner for organic fruits while five (C, D, E, F, H) among a total of nine supermarket outlets had a specific corner for grocery food. Three supermarket outlets (C, D, H) set up specific corners for vegetables, fruits, and grocery food.

Only one supermarket outlet (I) mixed organic food with conventional food. As a result, it was difficult to notice organic food immediately. Organic vegetables were placed at the same shelf as conventional vegetables; however, all the vegetables were claimed as chemically safe. Most organic grocery foods were placed at the same level as other, conventional, foods in supermarket outlet I. Only organic tea and organic rice were presented on the top of shelf with the organic tag at shelf. On the shelf of organic rice, there was an information tag describing the benefits of organic rice.

Each supermarket provided information about organic food to the consumers on the shop floor. Eight among nine supermarket outlets (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H) attached tags indicating "organic" at the organic food shelves. The information about special characteristics of organic food

was also provided; for examples; 1) no chemical substance (A, B, E, F), 2) organic standard (C, E, F), 3) No GMO (B, C), 4) traceability (B), 5) health benefit (H), and 6) natural (A).

Five among nine supermarket outlets (A, B, C, E, H) linked organic food with farmers and community support. Supermarket A, B, E, and H attached pictures of organic farmers beside the shelves of organic vegetables and fruits. A display at fruit shelves of Supermarket outlet A indicated that the product was "directly bought from Thai farmers and contributed to a sustainable community".

Two supermarket outlets (F and I) installed LED TV inside the outlet in order to show the consumers the origin of organic foods and how organic foods were prepared and transported to the supermarkets. Brochures about organic suppliers registered with the National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS) were also provided at a salad bar counter in the supermarket outlet G.

Although supermarket outlet I did not inform customers about organic food, the supermarket displayed the safety sampling results on a big board. The number of samplings and number of unsafe detections were presented to the customer. On the same board, the supermarket informed the customer about the measure for unsafe detection.

4.1.3. Product level

At the product level, the packaging information of the organic food products was investigated. This study found that the information provided on organic food packages included details about certification, as well as various backstory wordings and narratives, as well as illustrations on the package of the organic food.

Organic food sold in all supermarket outlets were certified by the "Organic Thailand" standard. Four among nine supermarket outlets (B, G, H, I) sold organic food certified by a 'Participatory Guaranteed System' (PGS). Eight supermarket outlets (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H) sold organic food certified by international standards such as USDA, IFOAM, EU organic, bio agri-cert, JAS CERES, Canada Organic, ACO certified organic, Bio, Organic from Australia. Supermarket outlet D mostly sold organic foods certified by international standards.

Storylines related to sustainability such as 'local product', 'community support', and 'safety' were found on product packages in all supermarket outlets. As an example of the latter, this is an example from a Supermarket C sugar product:

"We recommended local farmers to grow sugar cane without chemical substances. The farmers stop using chemical substances for 36 months before getting certified"

This study also found the pictures of local farmers on the package of organic food products.

Table 1. Location of observed outlet and number of interview informants.

Supermarket chain	Number of outlet (2016)	Location of observed outlet	Number of interview informants
A	134	Bangkok Province	-
B	196	Bangkok Province	-
C	101	Nonthaburi Province	-
D	34	Bangkok Province	1
E	32	Bangkok Province	-
F	20	Bangkok Province	3
G	20	Bangkok Province	4
H	15	Bangkok Province	-
I	13	Bangkok Province	3
TOTAL	565		11

4.2. Result from in-depth interview: Supermarket strategies in supplying organic food products

Our intention was to assess the three different strategies among Thai retailers; 1) strategies to increase consumer trust, 2) strategies to make organic food fit with urban lifestyles, and 3) strategies to make organic food affordable, whether these strategies fit with Thai consumers' lifestyle.

4.2.1. Supermarket strategies to increase consumer trust

The informants from supermarket D, F, and G mutually stated that official standards were a prime way to make consumers trust in the safety of their food. The informants from supermarket D, F and G mentioned that the minimum of their requirements for organic food was "Organic Thailand Standard" certified by Department of Agriculture. When asking about self-guarantee systems like the 'Participatory Guarantee Systems' (PGS), the informants from supermarket D and F mutually thought that the self-certification was unreliable. The informants from supermarket G stated that they accepted PGS organic food; however, they also tended to classify PGS organic food as "conventional food". On this note, the price of PGS organic food is as similar as conventional food. The PGS organic food was put in the conventional shelf with conventional foods. Accordingly, once the producers have changed from PGS to some official standard, they could then set up premium price and their products would be put on the organic food shelf.

Besides presenting and favoring the official standards, the informant from supermarket F indicated that they showed the origins of their organic foods on LED TV above the shelves. The informant from supermarket G stated that they also communicated with consumers via supermarket assistants, Product Consultant (PC), and Facebook. In their opinions, PC was mostly effective to convince new customer to try organic food products.

"We made short VDO of organic food producers to tell a story of food from farm to our supermarket. We open this VDO on LED TV above the organic food shelf. The consumers who are shopping know the origin or their food; how the organic food was produced, packed, and transported to the supermarket shelf."

Informant from supermarket F, 30 October 2018

"Using PC is mostly effective to introduce new products to new customers. Normally, PC is a supplier or farmer who know well about the origin and process of organic food. When the PC tells the story of organic food to new customer, the customer feel that trust the producers and always want to buy"

Informant from supermarket G, 13 December 2018

Unlike other supermarkets, the informant from supermarket I stated that they did not make much effort to provide certified organic food in their outlets. According to the interview, the consumers bought food from Supermarket I because they trusted in the supermarket's reputation; thus, certification of standards was not required. Supermarket I had their own safety regulation. For examples, they visited the farms of suppliers before signing the contract. All products brought into the shop were randomly tested to investigate chemical residue; the test results being shown to the consumers on a board at fruit shelf. The supermarket indicated that transparency was the best way to create trust with consumers. The supermarket would stop buying food from the supplier unless the supplier improved their standard.

"I think it is our responsibility to strictly test food from suppliers although the products are certified. That's why we have our own laboratory. It is not only the duty of procedures to control food safety, it is also our responsibility to ensure safety for our customers"

Informant from Supermarket I, 8 November 2018

The informants from supermarket G and I indicated that in the near future, they would adopt more information technology to increase consumers' trust. Since some consumers could not differentiate between various standards on the package, a QR code would be presented upon the package. The consumers could use mobile application to read the QR code. The informants from supermarket G stated that they would include the safety information in the QR code whilst the informant from supermarket I stated that they would show pictures of organic farmers and storyline in the QR code.

4.2.2. Supermarket strategies to make organic food fit with urban lifestyle

In order to provide organic food in the way that fits with urban lifestyle of consumers in Bangkok and its metropolitan area, the informants from all supermarkets commonly stated that they have offered more kinds of organic food as convenience foods. All informants said that most organic foods in the supermarket were vegetables, followed by fruits. They were aware that consumers need more organic vegetables within supermarket setting, including western-style vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and celery, as well as Thai vegetables such as Chinese kale, cucumber, pumpkin, basil, egg plant, baby corn, and green chilli. The informants from all supermarkets mutually stated that they attempted to find more organic suppliers around the country in order to provide various kinds of organic vegetables and fruits. The informants from supermarket D, F, and G reported that they also provided imported organic vegetables and fruits from USA and Australia.

"We also provide organic vegetables and fruits imported from USA and Australia in our supermarket to serve our high-end customers."

Informant from supermarket D, 20 November 2018

For organic grocery food, the informants from all supermarkets reported that they provided organic rice in their supermarkets. The informants from supermarket D, F, G informed that they also provided imported organic corn flake, organic soy bean, and organic baby food in their outlet.

To respond to the cosmopolitan lifestyle of urban consumers, the informants from supermarket G mentioned that they provided more exotic organic food so that urban consumers try new tastes of organic food. The informants from supermarket G also informed that they provided more ready to cook organic food, and sliced fruit in the outlet to serve urban consumers who did not have the time or patience for homemade cooking. In addition, the supermarket G offered ready to eat organic food via a salad bar and via soup. The informants from supermarket G mentioned that they would like to provide more ready to eat organic food; however, they confronted with the difficulty in finding organic cooking ingredients for more ambitious meals. As a result, only a salad bar and soups were provided. Similar to supermarket G, the informant from supermarket D stated that the supermarket has provided more ready to cook organic food. Organic fruits and vegetables were peeled, cutted, and packed for urban consumers who may not have time for cooking preparation. However, the informant from supermarket D informed that the regular consumers who always bought organic food would like to buy unpeeled organic vegetables rather than ready to cook food.

"Recently, we only provide organic salad bar and soup. We want to provide more ready-to-eat food but it is difficult to find organic ingredients such as fish sauce, spice, salt, sugar. As you know, Thai food needs lots of ingredients. We cannot find organic fish sauce to make organic ready-to-eat Thai food."

Informant from supermarket G, 13 December 2018

"We provide ready to cook pack of peeled and cutted vegetable in order to facilitate the customers. However, we notice that regular organic customers want to buy fresh and unpeeled organic vegetables."

Informant from supermarket D, 20 November 2018

The informants from supermarket I and F mentioned that they did not offer ready to cook food because it was difficult to control its quality. Also, they could not find all organic cooking ingredients to provide ready to eat organic food. Although both supermarket I and F had a restaurant inside the supermarket, the foods served in the restaurant were conventional. The informant from supermarket F stated that they may provide some organic menu in the restaurant in the recent future.

4.2.3. Supermarket strategies to make organic food affordable

The price of organic food is generally higher than the price of conventional food. Therefore, any price reduction would probably increase the product's competitiveness, and strategies which make organic food more affordable (such as price reduction and marketing promotions i.e. 'buy 1 get 1 free') might encourage the consumers to buy organic food more regularly. However, the result from the interview revealed that the retailers did not put any special 'lower price' marketing promotion into their organic food. The informants from all supermarkets commonly stated that their customers had a willingness to pay for premium price of organic food (if they trust that it was really organic).

"Our customers are high and medium class shoppers who want to find good quality food. They are willing to pay for premium price for organic food. They are confident to organic food sold in our supermarket"

Informant from supermarket D, 20 November 2018

"The customers of our supermarket are willing to pay for good food because they highly concern about their health. We will set up special promotion or discount for organic food products only when the suppliers request for that. The discount may attract new customers to try organic food from that supplier"

Informant from supermarket F, 30 October 2018

"Although our supermarkets sell sustainable food in reasonable price, we believe that the customers are willing to pay for food that is good for your health. If they believe that the food is really safe, the price is not a barrier for buying."

Informant from Supermarket I, 8 November 2018

The informant from supermarket I stated that they limit the price difference between organic food and conventional food at not more than 20 percent in order to ensure that the price was reasonable. They strongly believed that the consumers were willing to pay for this price difference for better choice of their health.

"Normally, our customers have purchasing power. However, we limit the price difference for not more than 20 percent because we would like to ensure that the customers would buy it. We believe that the customers don't mind paying for this premium price if they know that the organic food is really good for their health"

Informant from supermarket G, 13 December 2018

Thus, the supermarket did not offer any special marketing promotion to the organic food. The marketing promotion of organic food was similar to conventional food.

5. Discussion

The Social Practice Approach suggests ways in which retailers can improve their sustainable food provisioning and make this more visible to consumers. Supplying organic food products can be seen as embedded in broader retailer-consumer relationships, the social practices perspective can serve as a useful conceptual framework to analyze these transitions to sustainability (Oosterveer et al., 2014). The main objective of this study was to investigate the retailers' strategies in making organic food more visible and fit the consumers in Bangkok and its metropolitan area.

Three main strategies to encourage consumers to buy organic food in supermarket outlets are discussed here.

5.1. Providing information to Thai consumers

Consumers' trust in the sustainable practices of food producers influences buying decisions (Bonn et al., 2016; Steffen and Doppler, 2019). Providing unbiased and factual information is one way of increasing consumers' trust and willingness to pay for organic food (McFadden and Huffman, 2017). This study found that the retailers provided information about organic food to the consumers via third party certification and labeling, chemical testing disclosures, and storylines and pictures.

Organic certification and labeling are important sources of trust because they differentiate organic food from conventional food and ensure consumers that organic food is produced in accordance with the standards (Hamzaoui-Essoussi et al., 2013; Sønderkov and Daugbjerg, 2011). According to Chkanikova (2016), third-party certification is a private institutional arrangement that enable sustainability governance by retailers both upstream and downstream in the food chain. This study found that Thai retailers used certification (that is both third-party certification and a PGS – 'Participatory Guaranteed System') to communicate with the consumers. The third-party certification included the state certification and international certification. The state certification; so called "Organic Thailand" certified by Department of Agriculture were found in all supermarket outlets. According to Zhang et al. (2016), government-based trust-in-food regimes are important mechanisms to prevent food producers from selling low-quality and unsafe food. The study of Sønderkov and Daugbjerg (2011) also found that consumers were more likely to trust labeling schemes where the state played an active role. The result of this study is a contrast, somewhat, to some of these previous findings. According to the in-depth interview with informants from supermarkets, three among four supermarkets stated that the minimum requirement for organic food sold in was state labeling. In the opinions of Thai food retailers, the international labels that require higher standard than the state label would build more trust to the consumers. This is consistent with the findings from other observation. Eight supermarket outlets (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H) sold organic food certified by international standards such as USDA, IFOAM, EU organic, bio agri-cert, JAS CERES, Canada Organic, ACO certified organic, Bio, Organic from Australia. Our finding confirmed the findings of Sirisupluxana and Bunyasiri (2017) who found that urban Thai consumers were willing to pay for premium for a certified organic food.

Besides the official standard, organic food products with Participatory Guaranteed System (PGS) were found in four (B, G, H, I) among nine supermarket outlets during the observation. The principle of PGS is based on trust building between producers and consumers (Nelson et al., 2016). Sacchi et al. (2015) studied consumers in Brazil and found that 60.5% of the respondents bought PGS organic products.

This study showed that Thai modern retailers did not rely on PGS. The informants from supermarkets D and F mutually stated that the self-certification was untrustworthy and incomparable to the official standard. The informants from supermarket G stated that they accepted PGS organic food to sell in their outlet; however, they regarded PGS organic food as "conventional food". For examples, the price of PGS organic food was paid as similar as conventional food. The PGS organic food was also put in the conventional shelf. Once the producers have changed from PGS to official standard, they could set up premium price and their products would be put on organic food shelf. This is consistent with Lyons (2007) who suggested that the expansion of multiple organic retailers might increase secure markets and financial incentives for farmers considering conversion to organics.

Chen and Huang (2013) stated that the monitoring system and disclosure mechanism were the best way to ensure food safety to the public. Supermarket I displayed the result of sampling test on the board near vegetable shelf to show the consumers that they regularly test safety of food products no matter what the products were certified or not. Yeh

et al. (2018) confirmed that chemical residue testing information is valued higher than organic labeling.

The use of an in-depth storyline is another strategy to create consumers' trust. The storyline is a specific feature of small producers to ensure the quality of products to the consumers (Brunori et al., 2013). This study found that the storyline of how organic food was produced and benefit of organic food to the environment and community were communicated to consumers in several ways such as product presenter and product package. Most of the retailers informed that they eventually allowed the organic food supplier to set up a booth to present organic products in the supermarket. In their perspectives, product presenters mostly influenced new customers to buy organic food. This study also observed storyline on organic food packages in nine supermarket outlets. The content in the storylines included the origin of organic food, the way organic foods are produced and processed, and benefit to local farmers. The result of this study supported Ueasangkomsate and Santiteerakul (2016) who found that the 'local origin' attribute was the most important to correlate positively with the intention to buy significantly. This study also confirmed finding of Rainey et al. (2011) who found that supporting local farmers was one reason for purchasing organic food.

Besides having a storyline, the pictures of farmers were found on organic food package in supermarket outlet A, G and H. According to (Richards et al., 2011), symbolic imagery such as farmers' photographs and rural scenes is called 'visual sociology' that captures a moment of interaction between supermarket and consumer, in conveying a message about a product. This study agreed with Papaikononou and Ginieis (2017) who found that putting the farmer's pictures on food package is a strategy to connect consumers with the producers in the sense that they work together to protect the environment and to preserve agricultural traditions.

5.2. Offering organic food in the way that suits Thai urban consumers' lifestyle

The specific lifestyle routines of urban consumers is to live busy lives and have to combine careers with household tasks (Wertheim-Heck et al., 2015). Thus urban consumers are looking for convenient foods that ease their busy lives (Olsen et al., 2010). This study found two strategies that Thai retailers used to sell organic food in the way that fits with the lifestyle of urban consumers in Thailand. The first strategy was widening assortment of organic food while the other strategy was providing ready-to-eat form of organic food.

The wider is the assortment of organics (and the greater the availability of specific flavors and/or package sizes) the greater are the opportunities for customers to buy them (Ngobo, 2011; Smoluk-Sikorska and Luczka-Bakula, 2013). This study found that retailers made an effort to offer varied assortment of organic food in the supermarket outlets. The organic foods sold in the supermarkets in Bangkok and metropolitan included rice, variety of vegetables and fruits, organic corn flake, organic soy bean, and organic baby food. Considering the needs and desires of Thai consumers, the retailers attempted to provide more Thai vegetables such as kale, cucumber, pumpkin, basil, egg-plant, baby corn, and green chili. In additions, imported organic vegetables and fruits from the USA and Australia were provided in order to serve consumers who would like to purchase for exotic foods. This study confirmed Pedersen et al. (2017) who found that import of organic food is needed to satisfy consumer demand because the domestic organic market was still not well-established in Thailand.

Noting the busy and rushed lives of many urban consumers, a 'convenience food' culture has emerged in many countries. The ready-to-eat meal market has grown steadily in Europe (Olsen et al., 2010) and Korea (Bae et al., 2010). In India, the market for ready-to-eat foods including included frozen foods, pre-prepared and pre-packaged foods; as well as fast food meals at quick service restaurants, has expanded markedly (Madhvapathy and Dasgupta, 2015). Similar to other countries, the acceptance of ready-to-eat food has been on the increase among Thai

consumers. Jiumpanyarach (2018) found that Thai teen consumers were likely to buy ready-to-cook organic food items instead of conventional food items due to health and safety concerns. This study found that some Thai retailers attempted to provide more ready-to-eat organic food, ready-to-cook organic food, and cutting organic fruits in the outlet to serve urban consumers who did not have enough time for cooking. One retailer indicated that they offered organic soup and salad for consumers. However, the informants from other retailers were reluctant to provide organic ready-to-eat food because they could not easily find 100% organic ingredients.

5.3. Pricing strategy

The price difference between conventional food and organic food is an obstacle to broaden organic food to a large number of consumers (Dagevos, 2016). Generally, the consumers will be less willing to pay for organic food if they perceived the price of organics as high (Aschemann-Witzel and Zielke, 2017; Buder et al., 2014; Lee and Yun, 2015). Thus, lowering organic food prices would encourage the general consumers to buy organic food (Groszlik, 2017). However, Nasir and Karakaya (2014) explained that consumers did not consider only costs and benefits but the consumers purchased for organic food as a means of achieving important life values.

A number of scholars have studied willingness to pay for organic food in Thailand. The result of some research clearly indicated that price premium hinders purchase of organic food (Sangkumchaliang and Huang, 2012; Sriwaranun et al., 2015). Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen (2017) found that Thai consumers mistrusted the authenticity of organic food; therefore, they refused to pay for "stupidity fee" for an illusory premium. By contrast, some researchers found that Thai consumers were willing to pay for high price of organic food due to health concern (Posri et al., 2006; Roitner-Schobesberger et al., 2008; Ueasangkomsate and Santiteerakul, 2016) and demand for high quality food (Jiumpanyarach, 2018).

This study improved our understanding on how Thai retailers responded to consumers' willingness to pay. The informants from all supermarkets reported that Thai consumers were knowledgeable about benefit of organic food; thus, the consumers perceived for the value of organic food and willing to pay for premium price. The informants in this study believed that premium price made organic food different from conventional food. As a result, they did not offer any special marketing promotion to organic food. They focused on showing the consumers about values of organic food in order to give a reason why the consumer should pay for premium price rather than price reduction. They strongly believed that the consumers were willing to pay for this price difference for better choice of their health. The results of this study are in accord with previous studies in Thailand. Sriwaranun et al. (2015) surveyed willingness to pay of the consumers at five retail stores in metropolitan Bangkok and found that the respondents who thought that organic products provide greater quality and health benefits were willing to pay a premium. Jitrawang and Krairit (2019) found that price did not drive purchase intention of organic rice.

Only one retailer stated that they limit the price difference between organic food and conventional food at not more than 20 percent in order to ensure that the price was reasonable. For the reason that price strategy did not affect consumer demand for organic food, the respondents from all supermarkets reported that they did not offer any special 'price-related' marketing promotion to the organic food.

5.4. Contribution to SPA

This study confirmed that SPA is useful framework to develop a better understanding of the retailers' strategies, how they operate in practice, and how the strategies fits with consumers in urban Thailand. It highlights how organic food products in Bangkok and metropolitan are increasingly moving from a niche market to the mainstream.

Two retailers' strategies that fit with Thai consumers' preferences included providing information to the consumers and offering organic food in the way that suits Thai urban consumers' lifestyle. Thai Retailer-consumer relationship on organic food products is presented in Figure 1.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This research used SPA to study sustainable food consumption in Thailand by focusing on organic food providers. The objectives of this study included to explore information flow that supermarkets communicate with and to evaluate supermarket strategies in providing organic food to consumers in Bangkok and metropolitan area. Nine supermarket outlets at the head quarter of nine supermarket chains were observed. Eleven informants from four supermarket chains were interviewed.

The result of this study found that the retailers communicated with the consumers in visual level, shop floor level, and product level. At visual level, many wordings associated to sustainability such as "nature", "safe", "environment" were presented. At shop floor level, information tags and information bars were displayed to acknowledge the consumers about the value of organic food. At product level, storylines and pictures of farmers were presented to inform the consumers that their purchasing would contribute to community support.

This study agrees with the SPA that supermarkets are leading actors in provisioning sustainable food since they can promote sustainable food consumption and production by adopting different strategies. However, the strategies to attract consumers in Thailand were unique to lifestyle of Thai consumers and context. This research examined three strategies of Thai retailers in offering organic food to the consumers. The study result revealed that Thai retailers provided rich information about organic food to the consumers via standard certification, PGS, storyline, and pictures of farmers. The retailers also attempted to offer organic food in the way that suits urban consumers' lifestyle; for examples; various assortment and ready-to-eat organic food. Regarding pricing strategy, Thai retailers did not offer any special discount or marketing promotion to organic

food. They believed that the consumers were knowledgeable about values of organic food and willing to pay for premium price.

Two recommendations were drawn from this research. Firstly, we found that the retailers communicated with consumers in an indirect way via standard certification. However, lack of trust in the system may reduce willingness to pay for premium price of organic food (Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2017). Thus, this study recommends Thai retailers to provide more information accessible and trustworthy information about control system and the authenticity of organic food in order to create trust and to increase expectation of benefit from the consumers. The researcher agrees with Roitner-Schobesberger et al. (2008) that informing consumers about unique characteristics of organic production methods, the strict inspection and required third party certification was a promising strategy to develop the market for organic food in urban Thailand.

Secondly, many recent scholars confirmed that Thai consumers prefer convenience food (Chatthipmongkol and Jangphanish, 2016; Shannon, 2014; Thienhirun and Chung, 2018). Thus, this research recommends Thai retailers to continue offering ready to eat organic food. The result from this study found that some retailers were reluctant to provide ready to eat organic food because they could not find organic ingredient. However, the previous research has proved that consumers are willing to pay premium prices for organic foods, even those with less than 100% organic ingredients (Batte et al., 2007).

6.1. Limitations and direction for future research

There are some limitations of this study. Firstly, this study only focuses on organic food providers. The feedback from consumers towards supermarket's strategies is missing from this study. Secondly, only 4 from 9 supermarket chains were engaged in the in-depth interview. Three among four supermarkets represented high-end supermarket and only one represented specialized supermarket. No representatives from hypermarkets were willing to engage in the in-depth interview. Thirdly, this

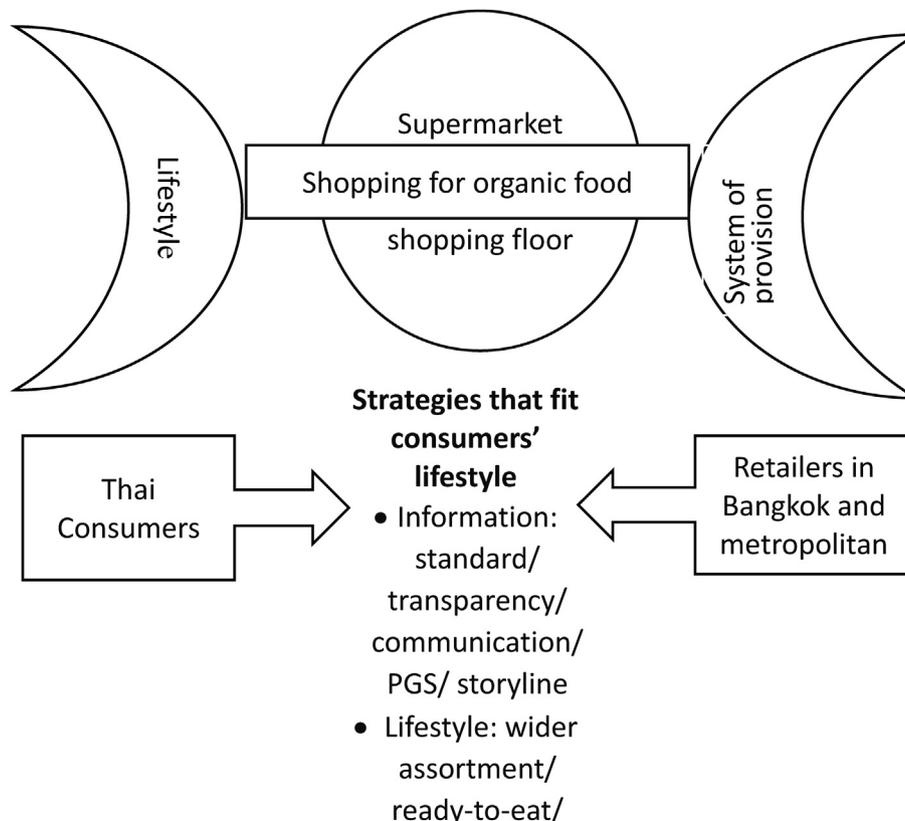


Figure 1. Thai Retailer-consumer relationships on organic food products (adapted by the authors from Spaargaren and Van Vliet, 2000).

study focused on the organic food provision strategies that fits tightly with the lifestyle of consumers in the Bangkok metropolitan area only. The provision of organic food to consumers in rural area was not included. Lastly, this study emphasized on the supermarket outlets where providers interact with the consumers. The online channels such as website shopping or mobile application were excluded from this study.

The future study should explore providers' strategy to sell organic food in online channels such as website and mobile application. In addition, consumers' response to providers' strategies should be further investigated.

6.2. Ethical clearance

This study has been approved by the committee for research ethics (Social Sciences), Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, Thailand (certificate of approval No. 2018/225/1809).

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Kanang Kantamaturapoj: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Alan Marshall: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

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Competing interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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