

FRESH FOOD MARKETS: WHAT MAKES CUSTOMERS WILLING TO PURCHASE ORGANIC PRODUCTS?

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ABSTRACT: *Due to the abundance of available information, people are generally knowledgeable about the negative effects chemical substances can have on their health. Therefore, many people tend to opt for organic products, especially organic food. It is important to understand what influences customers' purchasing of organic food. This empirical study aimed to identify consumers' knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, and preferences in relation to organic food produce in Vietnam. The study showed that customers' attitudes are changing, with many now preferring eco-friendly choices alongside organic items. Consumer consciousness regarding environmental-based harmful effects and associated problems was revealed as the basis for this change in attitude.*

Keywords: *Organic food, consumer knowledge, consumer attitudes, consumer behavior.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the late twentieth century, the world underwent remarkable changes due to the globalisation, open market economy, agricultural revolution, and most importantly some milestone inventions in information technology. As a result, the lifestyles of average people have changed in many ways. People are now generally more knowledgeable about and connected to the world, and people's preferences for organic foods have changed accordingly. However, many farmers habituated to traditional farming were not readily aware of the modern and technically advanced farming processes. Thus, they were not accustomed to using any pesticides, synthetic fertilisers, or various types of crop preservatives. The farming and consumption of naturally produced food items were an inherent part of ethical value systems that many people tried to maintain in every possible way [1]. These traditional concepts and methods, though effective, could not meet the increased food demand of the rapidly growing population and the changing lifestyles of the people. Furthermore, prolonged famines in some parts of the world reduced the supply of agricultural produce, consequently demanding more food production from other parts of the world that were not affected by famine. Agricultural producers slowly developed interest in the modern techniques of high-yield production. The period between the 1940s and 1960s witnessed several changes in agriculture. The new trend flourished despite the awareness that organic food was indispensable and good for human health. Bolstered by new inventions in synthetic fertilisers, preservatives, and pesticides, the farmers saw the economic gain in using these products in farming. As a result, organic farming lost its

significance, as both farmers and consumers realised the economic viability of the new kinds of agricultural production [2].

As the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides began to increase, and some negative outcomes surfaced. The most obvious effect of the indiscriminate use of fertilisers was environmental deterioration. At the same time, the quality of agricultural produce deteriorated drastically. Though the commercial objectives were met to a great extent, numerous health hazards resulted. The incidences of different lifestyle diseases increased; in some countries, even the death rates due to lifestyle diseases were found to be higher than other types of diseases. This raised alarm among consumers who realised the importance of food quality and its link with health issues. The popular saying 'You are what you eat' has begun to gain popularity as the demand for organic food products has grown [3]. At present, consumption of organic food items has risen in developed countries in Asia, Europe, and America, as well as in several developing economies, like India, China, and Brazil.

While consumers' attitudes towards organic food have overall remained positive, the available data in this realm shows that only a small proportion of consumers actually consume organic food and at much lower rates than other common non-organic food products also consumed. The market share of organic foods has diversified from approximately one percent in Eastern, Central, and Southern Europe to more than five percent in Austria and Denmark [4]. Beginning in the early 1990s, research related to the organic food market and related consumer behaviour gained momentum, and there have been several established theories applied by researchers. In the 1990s, researchers largely used the Values theory in their studies. Recently, scientists have tried using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) proposed by De Backer et al. (2009) as a suitable model for understanding people's behaviour regarding organic food consumption [5].

Organic agriculture comprises several traditional practices, such as the use of locally produced seeds or breeds, organic fertilisers, and biological methods of pest control [6]. It also uses the inter-cropping process and the rearing of nitrogen-fixing trees and legumes. With increasing disposable income, consumers can afford to buy organic food products to protect their health from various hazards that synthetic fertilisers and pesticides can cause. Researchers argue that following positive industry practices to promote organic food will help businesses produce such products in large quantities. Not all consumers are interested in organic products nor are aware of the attendant health benefits are known to everybody; thus, marketers need to create interest among consumers. To do this, marketers dealing with organic food or interested in doing business with this class of agricultural produce must understand the predictors of consumers purchasing these products.

It is evident that the nature of human food consumption has an immense impact on public health, lifestyle, and environment. Food consumption habits of the general populace are also responsible for increased greenhouse effects, increased pollution, and water scarcity. For instance, the consumption of beef is associated with carbon emission, as higher production of such protein entails higher carbon emissions, with 1 kg of protein producing up to 222 gm of carbon dioxide. Moreover, food-borne diseases have been shown to increase medical bills among affected households. Hence, promoting sustainable food behaviour is urgently needed today, including increased consumption of organic food, decreased consumption of fast food, and greater dependence on locally produced food. Such consumption behaviour should be promoted in all emerging economies that are facing various environmental and public health issues. Organic food consumption is believed to contribute to the development of sustainable food consumption behaviour with diverse benefits. This is substantially driven by consumers' social and environmental responsibilities. Numerous definitions are available for organic food, with the most common definition being the following one: 'Organic food is food produced by methods that comply with the standards of organic farming, which may restrict the use of certain pesticides and fertilisers in the farming methods used to produce such products. Organic foods typically are not processed using irradiation, industrial solvents, or synthetic food additives.' Organic food is also produced without the application of growth hormones and antibiotics. The majority of organic food consumers consider understand these food products as tasting better, being cleaner and healthier, and being safer in comparison to conventional food products.

Several studies on the purchasing of organic food have focused on the personal and social environments that develop awareness regarding organic food. Some personal attitudes and values, such as perceived quality, emotions, consciousness, personal knowledge, food taste, and food safety, play a vital role in developing people's food habits. Interestingly, findings regarding consumer attitudes towards organic food have been mixed. Many researchers have noted that the majority of consumers know the benefits of eating organic food, yet they do not consume these food products for various reasons. According to Adamtey et al. (2016), young generations hold a favourable attitude towards organic food products, but their actual purchasing of organic food remains very low in comparison to generally available food products [7].

According to Bublitz and Peracchio (2016), such difference between perception of organic food and actual practice when buying food items can be explained on the basis of consumers' buying behaviours and decision-making processes [8]. Deliana (2012) argues that the convenience of obtaining organic food products, knowledge of such products, authenticity of products designated organic, and price of such products are the key factors in customers' decision making [9]. Therefore, in spite of consumers' positive attitudes towards organic food, they still may not purchase organic food whether due to unavailability of organic products or affordability. Several researchers suggest that organic food retailers need to adopt green marketing practices to enhance consumers' interest in organic food. Green marketing practices have several aspects, such as the distribution of environmentally friendly products, eco-labelling, a green channel for distribution and sales promotion, intense publicity, and branding. The diverse environmental and situational factors regarding the purchasing rates of organic foods have remained unexplored.

Objectives of the Study

The key study objectives are as follows:

- To identify the major factors that have a high influence on the purchase of organic food.
- To evaluate the major reasons contributing to changing consumer attitudes related to organic food.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organic food

Organic food is produced by methods that comply with the standards of organic farming, which may restrict the use of certain pesticides and fertilisers in farming methods used to produce such products. Moreover, organic food is produced with the application of radiation. Thus, organic food can be considered healthy, as no artificial fertilisers are used in the farming of these food items [10]. Available literature in this realm includes a variety of terms to signify organic food items or products, such as 'local,' 'naturally grown,' 'fresh,' and 'pure.' Furthermore, organic farming practices are used by many farmers all over the world, through the number is low compared to the conventional farming practices [11].

Consumer attitudes and behaviours

Attitude plays a pivotal role in consumer attitudes regarding organic food. The label on a packaged food that mentions the health benefits of the food inside and lists the ingredients has a strong impact on consumer attitude toward said labelled product, as well as on the consumer's purchase intention. According to Thomas and Gunden (2012), consumers favour products that are marketed with detailed nutritional information [12]. Today's information-seeking consumers want to know as much as possible related to the food items they consume. Ethical issues, including concern for the environment, carbon emissions, and problems faced by animals due to human activities, also motivate people and build their intentions towards buying organic food [5]. Most people believe that organic food items are ethical products. Alwitt and Pitt (2010) believe that buying intention does not depend on whether the consumers possess positive attitudes towards the environment [13]. Millions of consumers around the world do not purchase products that are not ethically produced or where fair-trade practices have been violated. Such ethical consideration also affects the business of the suppliers who provide food items for the marketplaces, as the above-mentioned factors determine the market size and future demands of various food items. The study of Doran (2009) emphasises that fair-trade practice, fair-trade quality, and knowledge of fair-trade practices both directly and indirectly influence the buying behaviours of consumers [14]. Additionally, Auger et al. (2003) have studied the relationship between ethical consumerism and the demand for various products [15].

Key factors

Due to regular coverage of health-related topics and reports on the latest developments in medical science, the general population is more concerned about various health issues than in previous decades. Moreover, people's increasing concern about greenhouse effects or carbon emissions has raised consumers' awareness about the effects of their purchasing and consumption habits on nature. The number of green consumers has been increasing over time. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe, an increasing number of consumers are demanding completely safe and verified nutritious food products [16]. Simultaneously, the popularity of organically grown food items has been growing steadily in several Asian countries as consumers in these countries have begun believing that commercial food items are the root causes of various lifestyle diseases. An increasing number of people in these countries believe that their present food habits are the prime reasons behind diseases like diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer. This perception, accompanied by more disposable income, helps consumers feel motivated to pay

for risk-free organic food. As a result, many retail stores are setting aside shelves or sections exclusively for organic food products.

Health consciousness of consumers and expectations of well-being

The strongest motivations for purchasing organic food are health concerns. The notion that organic food was not produced with synthetic fertilisers or pesticides encourages people to look for these food items in the markets [17].

Quality and safety

An increasing number of consumers now believe that organic food is safe in every regard. Scientific research has proven that organic food items are safe and of high quality. Various food-borne diseases, like avian influenza and bovine spongiform encephalopathy, have also made people more likely to buy organic food items instead of commercial food items.

Ethical consumerism with environmentally friendly behaviour

In recent years, consumers' attitudes towards farming, agriculture, and business have been changing, mostly due to increasing ethical concerns related to environmental effects and business or agricultural practices. It is evident that social norms and environmental concerns can shape people's behaviours. However, some scholars do not believe that social norms are related to the human behaviour. According to Schwartz (2010), environmental concerns and social norms make people more ethical and cause them to examine things on ethical grounds [18]. According to Giesler et al. (2014), ethical consumerism is a new concept that connotes consumers' interest in buying only ethical products and abhorring unethical ones [19]. The practice of ethical consumerism motivates people to buy only green products that provide consumers with a sense of inner satisfaction. These types of consumers believe they have some responsibility towards nature, and in this way, by purchasing organic products, they meet the responsibility that they bear mentally. Many brands now understand the importance of 'going green,' and are thus adopting green processes and providing consumers with detailed information about their green efforts. This is helping these brands gain customer loyalty.

Willingness to pay

Sometimes, consumers lead cautious lifestyles due to a variety of negative emotions and perceived risk factors. For example, the fear of allergies from pesticides drives some people to avoid conventional food items. This, in turn, increases the demands for various organic food items.

Price and certification

Restricted access and unaffordability are some issues that create hurdles for the free passage of organic food. These factors in turn limit the demand for organic products, but farmers can increase their consumer bases by making their products available through different channels. Once availability is ensured, demand will rise. Certification is another important aspect that influences to customers' trust in purchasing organic products. Thus, it is imperative that farmers visit government authorised agencies or follow their directions to obtain appropriate certificates for their products [20]. Middle-class, upper-middle-class, and wealthy people are the prime target groups of organic food sellers, as these groups of people have shown more interest in these products.

Fashion trend and unique style

Certain foods bear status symbols in society. At present, using organic food or serving it to guests is considered a status symbol in many countries, as it depicts the purchasing power of the concerned individual or family.

Social consciousness

Buying behaviour, choice of distribution channel, and choice of product type may be indicative of consumers' personalities and lifestyles. It has been observed that each consumer has some distinctive features and consumes products that correspond to their personality. There are millions of consumers who are extremely concerned with social and public health issues that induce them to seek knowledge about the food items available in the market or the items people around them use almost daily. Social influence is highly subjective and has diverse effects on a consumer's attitude, opinions, and behaviour [21].

Determinants of organic food consumption

The determining factors that motivate people to consume organic food represent aspects related to values as compared to attitudes. First, its stability with period and core association with a person's

psychological system and secondly, with just a bunch of ten values, a person can include almost every particular value from various cultural features across the globe. Many researchers utilise this value theory to better understand the consumption of products grown organically or through sustainable agriculture. Researchers also implement analyses based on the means-end-chain method of associating commodity features with one of the recognised values. Here, the asserted values that will be discussed have been linked to the consumption of organic foods. The Schwartz (2006) values are used as the basis for every value's elaborated attributes [22].

Security

Harmonious and stabilising social structures, along with the safety of people and of society, are the major ideas. Many researchers have concluded that a customer's idea of well-being and association with the value of safety are the primary factors behind consumers buying organic edible items.

Hedonism

Hedonistic feelings can be considered to include aesthetic satisfaction and rich experiences for individuals. Marwa and Scott (2013) revealed that sumptuous and better taste is the factor that most motivates Swedish customers to purchase foods like dairy products, potatoes, meats, as well as breads [23]. Bamberg and Moser (2007) further showed that for the people of the Netherlands, taste is the primary and most significant criterion that factors into people's decisions to purchase organic foods [2].

Stimulation

New ideas, excitement, as well as life's issues are considered stimulations. Individuals may be motivated to understand and gather information regarding organic food items as novel goods available and then to purchase them. This is associated with the idea of Exploratory Buying Behaviour Tendency (EBBT). Fotopoulos and Krystallis (2002a, 2002b) explain that the presence of a customer group presenting a positive and solid EBBT is the major inspiration for buying or consuming organic products.

Universalism

Comprehension, appraisal, endurance, and preservation of the well-being of every person and nature are considered in universalism. Many empirical works show that the inclination to act in an eco-friendly manner is prolifically associated with universalism. Organic food is thus closely associated with eco-friendly attributes and is recognised as eco-friendly by numerous customers. A beneficial relationship between universalism and organic food is thus posited.

Benevolence

Conservation and enhancements of community or close contacts (in-group) are the prime concerns in benevolence. Padel and Foster (2005) saw that only a small number of their feedback providers connected organic items with regional manufacturing; however, the customers who made this connection tended to buy organic products because they see this as beneficial for their regional financial state [24]. These actions make these consumers feel positively about contributing to the community.

Self-direction

Individual beliefs and activities, such as selection, making, and examination, are considered in the idea of self-direction. Individuals may use organic edible items to differentiate themselves from other people and create a goodwill.

Conformity

Resistance to activities, levels of willingness, as well as impulses may be disadvantageous or infringe on community anticipations and rules. This impacts subjective norms through the implication of obligation or consistency with societal expectations.

Power

Hierarchies in society include aspects of reputation, regulation, prevalence, and dominance over persons as well as resources. Dreezens et al. (2005) observed that when customers had more value authority (dominance versus submissiveness), their ratings of organic foods were negative, while their ratings of GMO or genetically modified foods were positive.

Environmental care

Understanding environmental requirements is a prime factor in consumers' relationships with organic foods. Many researches have noted that organic product manufacturing is not harmful to nature.

Customers' growing awareness regarding nature and environmental concerns are culminating in greater organic food consumption. Ling (2013) assessed customers' motivations to buy 'green' food items, examining motivational aspects in different intensities and their impact on customers' buying preferences.

Health concern and lifestyle

Undoubtedly, lifestyle includes tremendous competitiveness and demands. Consistency in exercise and physical activity have proven difficult to maintain, making people susceptible to ailments and health concerns. Thus, customers are growing increasingly conscious regarding their diet and health in maintaining their overall well-being. People who are more aware of their well-being have greater inclinations towards organic food diets. For this, they are willing to pay premium charges in Cairo, the Egyptian capital, as noted by Mohammed et al. (2012). Healthy lifestyle and awareness of such are the most vital aspects in motivating people to buy organic food and in increasing people's interest in paying premium costs for that food. However, premium prices and dubious organic certification tended to be vital impediments in customers' motivation to purchase organic products.

Product quality

The quality of the products determines their value. Typically, customers of organic products are less troubled by high prices and prioritise quality over price. Ozguven (2012) explored the motivational aspects for purchasing organic food items in Izmir, Turkey. Maximum feedback-givers chose organic food, including milk, fruits and vegetables. The outcomes of the study recommended that qualitative aspects and cost were major aspects in consumers' actions and formed more important associations for consumers compared to other aspects explored.

Subjective norms

Subjective norms or regulations have a vital impact on customer decisions to buy specific items, particularly in places where a high intensity of communication exists in the society. People's choices are influenced by other people, including acquiring a specific attitude. Thorgosen et al. (2015) investigated aspects impacting organic food usage in the Chinese market. In their research, the results of their survey on mentalities regarding beef were assessed, and the way these ideas impacted consumption were also presented. The impact of behaviours, attitudes, and subjective norms on motives of customers were studied. As per the results, attitudinal and subjective norms were crucial factors in influencing consumer needs, although attitude had higher significance among these two factors.

CONCLUSION

In this research, a comprehensive analysis of relevant facets impacting consumer ideas about, behaviours regarding, and likelihood of consuming organic foods in Vietnam was presented. The results showcased the attitude-behaviour difference in the context of pro-climatic or circumstantial attitude, as well as organic diet usage. A retailer or marketing specialist now must use this information to realise increased purchasing and consumption of organic diets. It is necessary to examine the recognised determinants of attracting customers who are not accustomed to organic food consumption. Furthermore, marketers could devise novel plans to turn customers who regularly consume organic food into loyal customers. This information could be helpful for farmers who wish to contribute to a cooperative society by producing organic food. In the same manner, experts in the food, travel, retail, and tourism sectors can utilise the outcomes of the current study to take qualitative steps toward increased consumption of organic food. Moreover, these experts' ideas about and knowledge of customers' purchasing decisions could be used to improve acquisition and retention of clients of organic food. Holistic consciousness regarding organic food among the general population is rising, along with positive attitudes about buying and consuming organic food. The following are all involved when assessing customer behavior: the mental processes that customers face when recognising demand or need, methods for addressing these needs, the gathering and synthesising of information, plans and their execution, and purchasing resolutions both before and after buying. These are also the core influences affecting how consumers in society affect the climate by means of organic food. Due to increased consciousness regarding the environment and the harmful effects of non-organic food-production processes, consumer purchasing attitudes are currently moving further toward eco-friendly choices, alongside organic items.

CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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