CUSTOMER ATTITUDES, PREFERENCES, AND EXPECTATIONS TOWARDS ORGANIC PRODUCTS: *A STUDY FROM THRISSUR DISTRICT, KERALA*

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Abstract: *This study titled "Customer Attitudes, Preferences, and Expectations Towards Organic Products: A Study from Thrissur District, Kerala" investigates the socio-economic profiles, product preferences, and perceptions of consumers who regularly purchase organic products. Data were collected through structured interviews with 100 customers at Nisarga Organics and Vasudha Organic Bazar, two prominent organic stores in Thrissur, during September – October 2015. The findings reveal that the majority of respondents are well-educated, with 84% holding degrees or professional qualifications, and predominantly fall within higher income brackets. Consumers exhibit a strong preference for organic vegetables and fruits (32%), followed by dairy products (24%) and cosmetics (13%). The study highlights that 88% of respondents are willing to purchase organic products despite price hikes, reflecting the perceived health benefits and quality associated with organic products. While 74% of consumers are confident in the organic authenticity of their purchases, 26% remain uncertain, indicating a need for improved transparency. The unanimous belief that organic products contribute to better lives (100%) and the high overall satisfaction (88% rating them as very good or good) underscore the positive consumer attitudes towards organic products.*

***Keywords*:** Organic Products, Consumer Attitudes, Product Preferences, Socio-Economic Profile, Thrissur, Kerala, Organic Market, Health Benefits, Product Quality.

INTRODUCTION

The global market for organic products has witnessed remarkable growth over the past decade, driven by increasing consumer awareness about health, environmental sustainability, and the benefits of organic farming. As consumers become more conscious of the origins and quality of their food and other products, their preferences are shifting towards organic options. This growing trend highlights the need for a deeper understanding of customer attitudes, preferences, and expectations in the context of organic products. This study aims to provide a detailed exploration of customer attitudes, preferences, and expectations regarding organic products. The findings are expected to offer actionable insights for stakeholders in the organic market, helping them to better meet consumer needs and contribute to the sustained growth of the organic product industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Organic Products Market

The organic products market has experienced significant growth globally, driven by increasing consumer awareness about health, environmental sustainability, and food safety. In India, the organic market is also burgeoning, with a notable increase in both production and consumption. Reports by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) indicate that India ranks among the top countries in terms of organic farming. Fatima (2013) identifies several challenges in organic tomato cultivation, including lack of irrigation, marketing issues, insufficient storage facilities, price fluctuations, and lack of financial support. To address these challenges, Fatima suggests that the government should implement awareness programs on organic farming, provide information on available subsidies and loan facilities for farmers, and ensure the establishment of at least one cold storage centre in each major tomato selling market.

Consumer Attitudes Towards Organic Products

Consumer attitudes towards organic products are generally influenced by factors such as health benefits, environmental concerns, and food safety. A study by Smith and Paladino (2010) found that consumers are willing to pay a premium for organic products due to their perceived health benefits and environmental friendliness. Similarly, Padel and Foster (2005) highlighted that consumers' trust in organic labels and certifications plays a crucial role in their purchasing decisions. Shashikiran and Madhavaiah (2014) investigate consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food products. Their study reveals that customers have a positive attitude towards organic products and show an increased willingness to pay higher prices for them. Approximately 53% of consumers are aware of the availability of organic produce in the market. Consumers are willing to pay 20-30% more for organic food products, driven by their perception that organic products are worth the extra cost and their belief in the safety and health benefits of these products.

Preferences and Buying Behaviour

Preferences for organic products vary widely among consumers, often shaped by demographic factors such as age, income, and education level. Research by Kriwy and Mecking (2012) suggests that younger consumers and those with higher education levels are more likely to purchase organic products regularly. Additionally, income levels significantly influence the ability and willingness to pay the higher prices typically associated with organic products. A study conducted by Aertsens et al. (2011) emphasizes the importance of socio-demographic factors in understanding consumer preferences for organic food. Ragavan and Mageh (2012) explore the factors influencing consumer purchase intentions towards organic products. They find that perceptions of product safety, environmental friendliness, and the availability of product information are major determinants of consumers' purchase intentions. These factors significantly impact consumers' decisions to buy organic products.

Expectations from Organic Products

Consumers have high expectations from organic products, primarily regarding their health benefits and environmental impact. A study by Hughner et al. (2007) revealed that consumers expect organic products to be free from pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and artificial additives, thus providing a healthier and more natural alternative to conventional products. Furthermore, environmental concerns drive consumers to prefer organic products that are perceived to have a lower carbon footprint and support sustainable farming practices.

Indian Context and Regional Studies

In the Indian context, the organic products market is still in a nascent stage but growing rapidly. A study by Suresh (2013) on Indian consumers' attitudes towards organic food found that health consciousness, environmental concerns, and food safety were the primary motivators for purchasing organic products. Region-specific studies, such as those conducted in urban areas of Kerala, indicate a similar trend. Kerala, known for its high literacy rate and health consciousness, has seen a growing demand for organic products. A survey by Nandi et al. (2015) in Kerala revealed that consumers are increasingly opting for organic products due to concerns about the long-term health effects of pesticides and chemical fertilizers used in conventional farming.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite the proliferation of organic products in the market, there is still a gap in comprehensive research that delves into the specifics of what drives consumer choices and satisfaction in this sector. This study aims to bridge that gap by providing valuable insights into consumer behaviour related to organic products, which is essential for retailers, marketers, and producers to align their strategies with consumer expectations. The existing literature underscores the complexity of consumer behaviour regarding organic products, shaped by a myriad of factors ranging from health and environmental concerns to socio-demographic influences. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for stakeholders in the organic market to effectively cater to consumer needs and expectations. This study aims to build on this body of knowledge by providing specific insights from the Thrissur District of Kerala, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the organic products market in the Indian context.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess the general perceptions and beliefs that customers hold about organic products.
2. To understand the factors that influence positive or negative attitudes towards organic products.
3. To determine which types of organic products are most preferred by consumers.
4. To explore the specific attributes of organic products (e.g., health benefits, environmental impact) that drive consumer preference.
5. To offer actionable recommendations for retailers, marketers, and producers to better meet customer needs and enhance the market for organic products.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour related to organic products, which can inform strategies to support the growth of the organic market in Thrissur District and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this research is to explore and analyse the attitudes, preferences, and expectations of customers who regularly purchase and use organic products. To achieve this, the study focuses on a sample of 160 customers from two prominent organic stores: Nisarga Organics, Kottappuram, Thrissur, and Vasudha Organic Bazar, Punkunnam Thrissur. These stores are well-known for their extensive range of organic products and attract a dedicated customer base that values organic quality.

Period of study was September – October 2015

Data collection was meticulously carried out through structured interviews, conducted by trained enumerators who ensured the reliability and accuracy of the responses. The structured interview schedule was designed to cover various aspects of consumer behaviour, including factors influencing their purchase decisions, satisfaction levels, and future expectations from organic products. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify and expand on initial responses, providing a richer dataset for analysis.

To supplement the primary data, secondary sources such as academic journals, magazines, and reputable web resources were reviewed. This comprehensive approach not only aids in understanding the current market dynamics but also provides a theoretical framework to interpret the findings within a broader context of consumer behaviour literature.

The analysis of the collected data employs simple yet effective analytical tools, including count and frequency distributions and percentage calculations. These methods help in distilling the data into meaningful insights that reflect the collective attitudes and preferences of the surveyed customers.

By adhering to these methodologies, the study aims to provide a thorough and reliable understanding of customer attitudes, preferences, and expectations regarding organic products.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

table 1. socio economic profile of respondents (source: primary data)

Variable	Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Education	Up to10th Class	10	6
	Plus - Two	16	10
	Degree /Diploma	102	64
	Professional degree	32	20
Occupation	Salaried	64	40
	Business	35	22
	Profession	51	32
	others	10	6
Monthly Income	Below 5000	3	2
	5000 -15000	26	16
	15000 -30000	35	22
	30000 - 50000	51	32
	Above 50000	45	28

The socio-economic profile of the respondents can provide valuable insights into the demographic characteristics of individuals who regularly purchase and use organic products.

Education

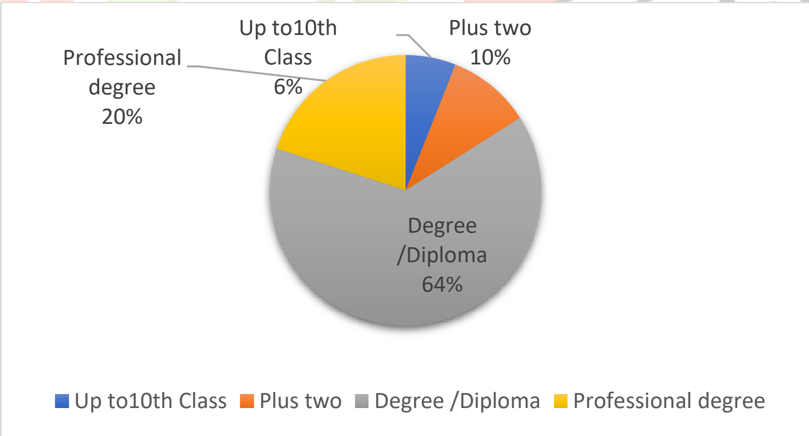

figure 1. education level of respondents

Degree/Diploma (64%) and Professional Degree (20%): A significant majority of the respondents have attained higher education levels (84% in total). This suggests that well-educated individuals are more likely to purchase and use organic products, possibly due to greater awareness and understanding of the health and environmental benefits associated with such products.

Up to 10th Class (6%) and Plus-Two (10%): A smaller portion of the respondents have lower educational qualifications. This indicates that while organic product use is more common among the more educated, there is still a segment with basic education that engages with organic products.

Occupation

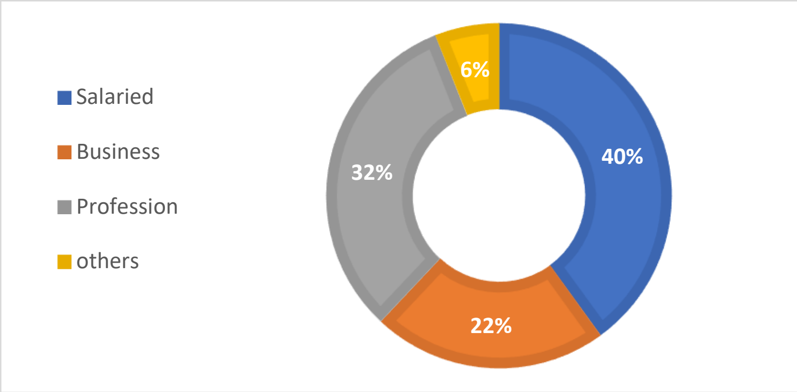

figure 2. occupation of respondents

Salaried (40%) and Professional (32%): The largest groups are salaried employees and professionals, making up 72% of the respondents. These groups likely have stable incomes, which enables them to afford the premium prices of organic products.

Business (22%): A significant portion of respondents are involved in business. Business owners may have varying incomes but can generally afford higher-priced goods.

Others (6%): This category includes individuals not covered by the other occupational groups, indicating a small but diverse segment of respondents with varied employment backgrounds.

Monthly Income

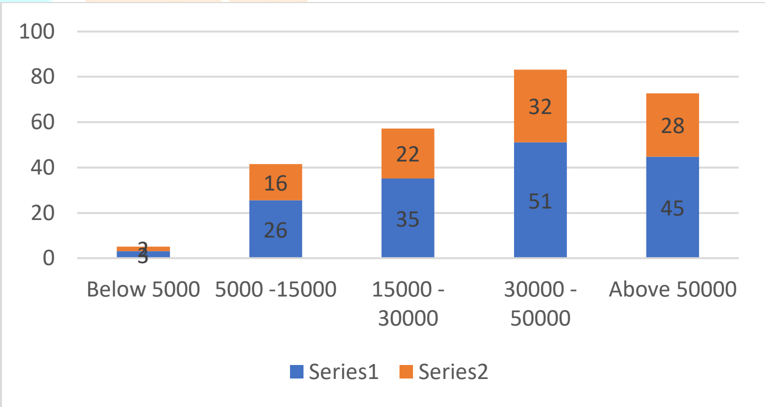

figure 3. income level of respondents

₹30000 - ₹50000 (32%) and above ₹50000 (28%): A significant proportion of respondents have relatively high monthly incomes (60% in total). This indicates that higher-income groups are more likely to purchase organic products, as they can afford the higher prices associated with these products.

₹15000 - ₹30000 (22%): A substantial portion of respondents fall into the middle-income category, showing that organic product consumption is also prevalent among moderately well-off individuals.

Below ₹5000 (2%) and ₹5000 - ₹15000 (16%): There is a smaller representation from lower-income groups. This suggests that while there is some engagement with organic products among these groups, affordability may be a barrier to wider adoption.

The socio-economic profile indicates that the respondents are predominantly well-educated, with a majority holding degrees or professional qualifications. Most respondents have stable occupations, either salaried or professional, and a significant proportion have higher monthly incomes. This profile suggests that the consumption of organic products is more common among educated and higher-income individuals, who are likely more aware of and can afford the benefits of organic products. However, there is still a diverse range of respondents across different education levels, occupations, and income groups, highlighting varying levels of engagement with organic products across the socio-economic spectrum.

table 2. product familiarity and purchase behaviour (source: primary data)

Familiarity and Purchase Behaviour	Responses	Respondents	Percentage
Familiarity	In the past 1 year	13	8
	1-2 year	54	34
	2-3 year	51	32
	More than 3 years	42	26
Frequency of purchase	Several times a week	35	22
	Once a week	61	38
	Once a month	45	28
	Few times a year	19	12
Reasons for purchase	Maintain good health	79	49.23
	Prefer the taste	22	13.84
	Quality	54	33.84
	Protection to environment	5	3.07
Sources of information	Information from magazines	52	32.78
	Data from internet	21	13.11
	Advises from people	63	39.34
	Self	24	14.75
	Other	32	20

Familiarity with Organic Products

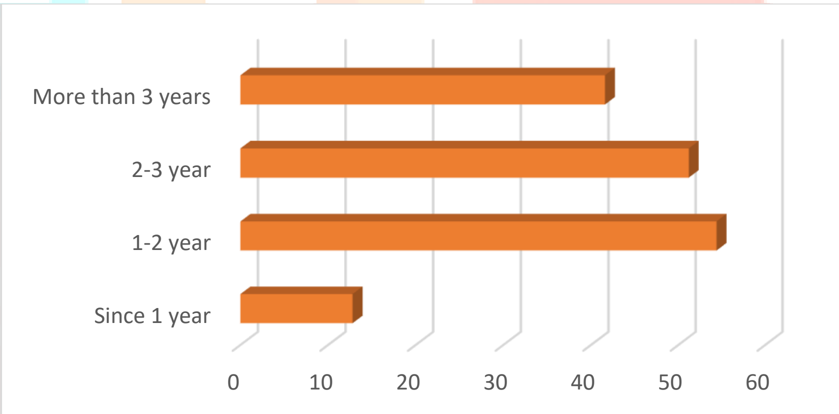

figure 4. familiarity with organic products

1-2 years (34%) and 2-3 years (32%): Most respondents have been familiar with organic products for 1-3 years. This indicates that organic products have gained substantial awareness among consumers over the past few years.

More than 3 years (26%): A significant portion of respondents have been familiar with organic products for more than three years, suggesting a dedicated and possibly more knowledgeable consumer base.

In the past 1 year (8%): A smaller group of respondents have only recently become familiar with organic products, indicating ongoing growth in awareness and market penetration.

Frequency of Purchase

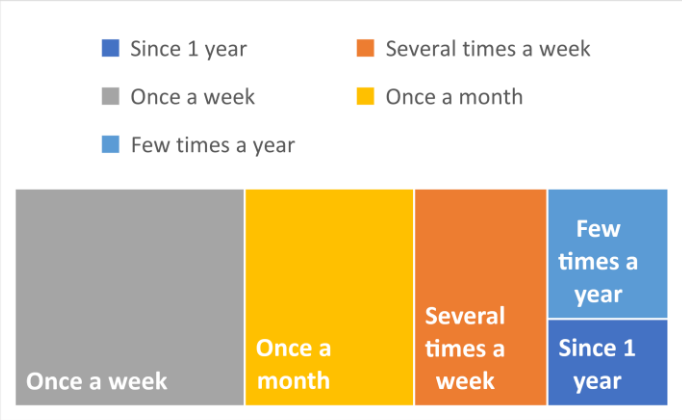

figure 5. frequency of purchase

Once a week (38%) and Several times a week (22%): The highest frequency categories suggest that a significant portion of respondents are regular purchasers of organic products, indicating strong and consistent demand.

Once a month (28%): A substantial number of respondents purchase organic products monthly, showing moderate but steady engagement with organic products.

Few times a year (12%): A smaller segment of respondents purchase organic products infrequently, possibly due to higher costs or limited availability.

Reasons for Purchase

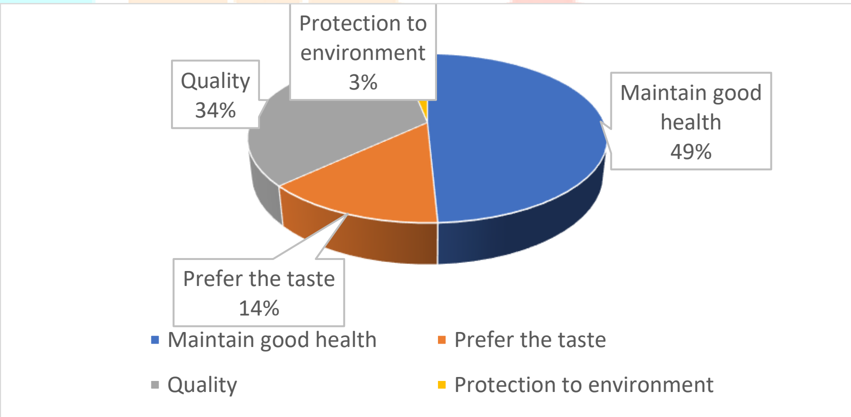

figure 6. reasons for purchase

Maintain good health (49.23%): The primary reason for purchasing organic products is health maintenance, highlighting the importance of health consciousness among consumers.

Quality (33.84%): Quality is also a significant reason, suggesting that consumers perceive organic products to be superior in quality compared to conventional ones.

Prefer the taste (13.84%): Taste preference is another notable reason, though less prominent than health and quality considerations.

Protection of the environment (3.07%): Environmental protection is the least cited reason, indicating that while some consumers are motivated by environmental concerns, it is not the primary driver for most.

Sources of Information

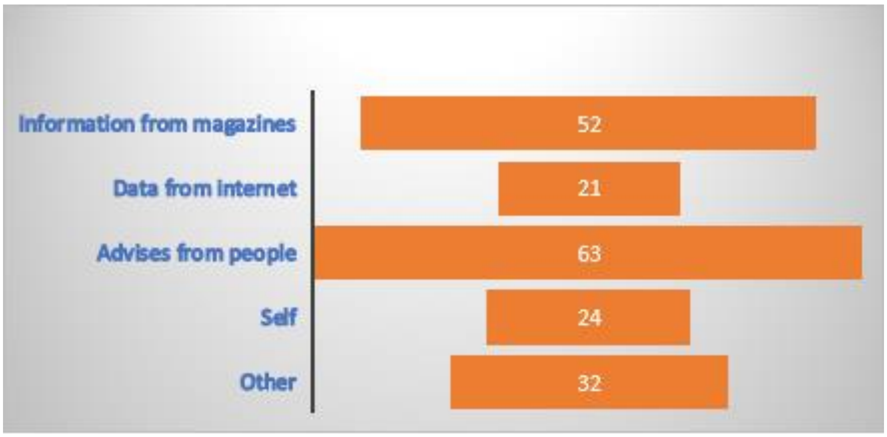

figure 7. sources of information about organic products

Advice from people (39.34%): The most common source of information is advice from people, indicating that word-of-mouth plays a crucial role in spreading awareness about organic products.

Information from magazines (32.78%): Magazines are also a significant source of information, suggesting that traditional media continues to influence consumer behavior.

Self (14.75%) and Data from internet (13.11%): These sources indicate that personal research and online information are important but secondary to interpersonal and print media influences.

Other (20%): A notable portion of respondents rely on other sources, reflecting the diverse ways consumers gather information about organic products.

The interpretation of the familiarity and purchase behaviour data reveals key insights into consumer engagement with organic products:

Most respondents have been familiar with organic products for 1-3 years, indicating growing awareness and market penetration over recent years. A significant portion of consumers purchase organic products regularly (weekly or several times a week), demonstrating strong and consistent demand. Health maintenance and product quality are the primary reasons for purchasing organic products, underscoring the health and quality perceptions associated with organic products. Word-of-mouth and magazines are the predominant sources of information, highlighting the importance of interpersonal communication and traditional media in influencing consumer behaviour. These insights can help stakeholders understand consumer motivations and tailor their strategies to better meet the needs and preferences of organic product consumers.

table 3. product preferences (source: primary data)

Product Preference	Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Preferred Products	Vegetable/Fruits	51	32
	Cosmetics	20	13
	Dairy products	39	24
	Cereals/Pulses	17	10
	Food and drinks	21	13
	Coffee	6	4
	Chocolate	3	2
	Other	3	2

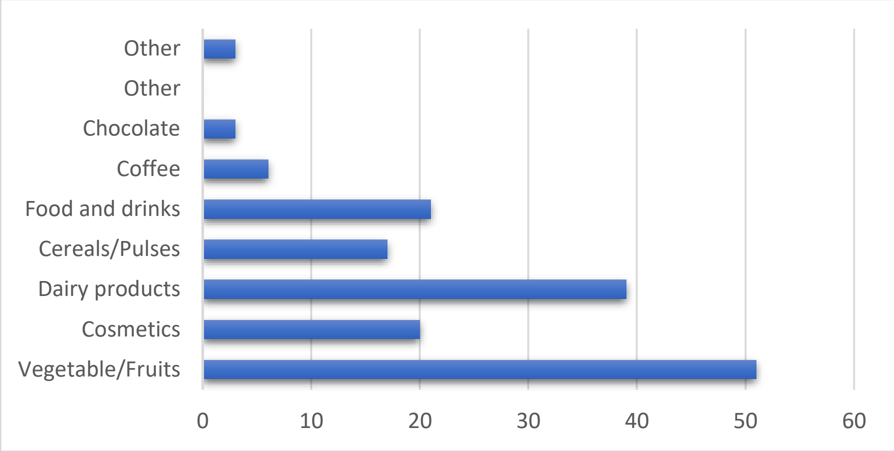

figure 8. product preferences of respondents

Vegetables/Fruits (32%): The highest preference among respondents is for organic vegetables and fruits. This indicates that fresh produce is a primary area of interest for consumers who opt for organic products, likely due to concerns about pesticide use and a desire for healthier, more natural food options.

Dairy Products (24%): Dairy products are the second most preferred category. This preference suggests that consumers value organic dairy for its perceived health benefits, such as the absence of hormones and antibiotics, and the ethical treatment of animals.

Cosmetics (13%): Organic cosmetics also hold significant interest. This reflects a growing trend among consumers to seek out natural and non-toxic personal care products, driven by concerns about skin health and exposure to synthetic chemicals.

Food and Drinks (13%): Organic food and drink items, excluding fresh produce and dairy, are also popular. This category includes packaged organic foods and beverages, indicating a broader interest in incorporating organic options into various aspects of diet and lifestyle.

Cereals/Pulses (10%): Cereals and pulses are preferred by a smaller but notable segment of respondents. These staples form a significant part of many diets, and the preference for organic options reflects concerns about agricultural chemicals and nutritional quality.

Coffee (4%): Organic coffee, though less popular than other categories, is chosen by some respondents. This preference might be driven by taste, environmental concerns, and the desire to support sustainable farming practices.

Chocolate (2%): Organic chocolate has a very small but dedicated following. Consumers who prefer organic chocolate may be motivated by taste, ethical sourcing, and health considerations.

Other (2%): A small percentage of respondents prefer other organic products not specified in the main categories. This shows that there is interest in a variety of organic items beyond the most mentioned categories.

The product preferences indicate that fresh produce (vegetables/fruits) and dairy products are the most popular categories among respondents, highlighting the importance of basic food items in the organic market. Cosmetics and various food and drink items also show considerable interest, reflecting a broader application of organic preferences in personal care and dietary choices. Smaller segments show interest in specific items like coffee and chocolate, suggesting niche markets within the organic sector. Understanding these preferences can help retailers and producers tailor their offerings to meet consumer demand, focusing on the most sought-after categories while also catering to niche interests. This information is valuable for developing marketing strategies, product development, and inventory management to better serve the organic consumer base.

table 4. customer perception towards organic products (source: primary data)

Perception	Responses	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Pricing	Expensive	90	56
	Moderate	70	44
	Low	0	0
Hike in price	Willing to buy	141	88
	Not willing to buy	19	12
Organic Property of Product	Certain	118	74
	Not certain	42	26
Perception on Betterment of Lives	Better lives	160	100
	No better lives	0	0
Overall Ranking	Very good	109	68
	Good	32	20

	Average	16	10
	Same as non-organic	3	2

The table provides insights into respondents' perceptions of organic products in terms of pricing, willingness to buy despite price hikes, certainty about the organic nature of products, perceived impact on quality of life, and overall ranking.

Pricing

Expensive (56%): Most respondents perceive organic products as expensive. This indicates a common perception that organic products are priced higher than conventional alternatives, which might affect purchasing decisions for some consumers.

Moderate (44%): A significant portion finds the pricing moderate, suggesting that nearly half of the respondents consider the cost of organic products acceptable for their perceived value.

Low (0%): No respondents consider organic products to be low-priced, reinforcing the perception that organic products are generally more costly.

Willingness to Buy Despite Price Hikes

Willing to Buy (88%): A vast majority are willing to continue purchasing organic products even if prices increase. This suggests strong commitment and perceived value in organic products, indicating that factors such as health benefits and quality outweigh cost considerations for most consumers.

Not Willing to Buy (12%): A small fraction would not buy organic products if prices rise, showing that while price sensitivity exists, it is not predominant.

Certainty about Organic Nature of Products

Certain (74%): Most respondents are confident in the organic authenticity of the products they purchase. This high level of certainty likely stems from trust in certification labels and brand reputation.

Not Certain (26%): Over a quarter of respondents are unsure about the organic status of the products, highlighting a need for better transparency, labeling, and consumer education to build trust.

Perception on Betterment of Lives

Better Lives (100%): Every respondent believes that organic products contribute to better lives. This unanimous perception underscores the strong belief in the health and lifestyle benefits associated with organic products, which is a powerful driver for their purchase.

Overall Ranking

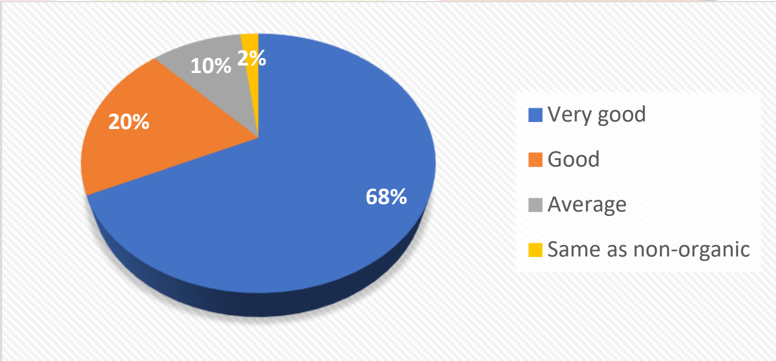

figure 9. overall ranking given to organic products

Very Good (68%) and Good (20%): Most respondents rate organic products positively, with 88% categorizing them as either "very good" or "good." This indicates high satisfaction levels and positive consumer experiences with organic products.

Average (10%) and Same as Non-organic (2%): A small percentage rate organic products as average or equivalent to non-organic products, suggesting that for a minority, the perceived benefits of organic products do not significantly differentiate them from conventional alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Organic products are predominantly perceived as expensive but acceptable in terms of value, with a strong willingness among consumers to continue purchasing them despite potential price increases. Most respondents are confident in the organic nature of the products they buy, although a significant minority express uncertainty, indicating room for improvement in transparency and labelling. There is a unanimous belief that organic products contribute to better lives, underscoring the perceived health and lifestyle benefits. Overall satisfaction with organic products is high, with a majority rating them very good or good, reflecting positive consumer experiences. These insights suggest that while price and certainty about organic authenticity are areas that might need attention, the overall positive perceptions and high willingness to pay indicate a robust market for organic products driven by health and quality considerations.

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