



Consumers' Perception About Organic Foods – A Review

1Dr. Machhindranath Koshti, 2Dr. NEERAJ GUPTA

1Associate Professor (Marketing), 2Associate Professor (Finance)

1NL Dalmia Institute of Management Studies and Research ,

2NL Dalmia Institute of Management Studies and Research

Abstract

The surge in food demand has pushed agriculture towards employing extensive techniques, leading to the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, adversely affecting public health. Consequently, health-conscious individuals are increasingly opting for organic foods, cultivated naturally. Despite this trend, the demand for organic foods remains sluggish in certain regions. This paper seeks to explore the factors driving consumers towards organic foods and the obstacles hindering the growth of their demand.

Key words – Organic foods, Synthetic Chemicals, Yield, Trust

Introduction

The rapid growth of industrial development, modernization, and overpopulation has significantly increased pressure on food production to discover more effective methods for boosting crop yields (Basha et al., 2015). This surge in food demand has driven agriculture to adopt increasingly intensive techniques to enhance production yields. Consequently, there has been widespread and indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Consumers ingest these residual chemicals through food, negatively impacting health and well-being. Opting for organic foods is one strategy to protect against the harmful effects of inorganic foods. In recent years, the consumption of functional and organic foods has risen due to consumers' growing health consciousness (Rizzo et al., 2023; Migliore et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly spurred more people to prefer organic products and support local producers. Nonetheless, the demand for organic foods remains slow in some regions. This study aims to identify the factors contributing to this sluggish demand and propose corrective measures.

Literature Review

What is meant by organic food?

In the late 20th century, when the term "organic" was not widely recognized, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defined it as a production method that excludes synthetic materials from the growing process. This method ensures high-quality products and promotes environmental conservation. Pearson (2011) and his colleagues note that "organic food" can be defined and interpreted differently across various cultures worldwide. It plays a crucial role in the evolving structure of food production, relying heavily on practical and multifaceted factors such as biology, sociology, and ecology, rather than solely on chemical and physical management (Doran et al., 2007; Guéguen & Pascal, 2016). Generally, "organic food" refers to food produced without artificial chemicals like hormones, pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers, making it safe for both consumers and the environment (Lairon, 2010; Tsakiridou et al., 2008). Lairon (2010) and Yin et al. (2010) similarly describe organic food as being produced without artificial chemicals, including hormones, herbicides, or fertilizers. However, Moustier (2006) differentiates "organic food" from "safe food," the latter allowing the use of artificial substances in limited quantities. While many people believe organic food is more nutritious than conventional food, this does not imply that safe or conventional foods lack nutritional value (Magkos et al., 2009). Aside from minor differences in micronutrient levels like Omega-3 fatty acids or antioxidants, the macronutritional content between them is quite similar (Vigar et al., 2020).

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, organic foods are produced as naturally as possible, utilizing physical, mechanical, or biological farming methods, and providing animals with living conditions that support their natural behaviors. Organic foods do not contain genetically modified organisms or chemical additives, and their production excludes chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Paul & Rana, 2012). Due to these characteristics, organic products have a lower environmental impact compared to conventional products (Gomiero, Pimentel, & Paoletti, 2011). According to the USDA, organic food is produced using sustainable agricultural practices (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

In India, the regulation of organic food is overseen by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA). Organic products in India are cultivated using agricultural methods that exclude chemical fertilizers and pesticides, with a focus on environmental and social responsibility (APEDA, 2017). The Indian government has established the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) to develop standards for organic farming, promote organic agriculture, and accredit certification bodies. Organic agricultural land in India accounts for 0.4% of the total, with 5.71 million hectares under organic certification as of 2015-16. This includes 1.49 million hectares (26%) of cultivable land and 4.22 million hectares (74%) of forest and wild areas used for collecting minor forest products (Willer, 2016). The Codex Alimentarius Commission defines organic agriculture as a holistic production management system that promotes agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. The fundamentals of organic farming include minimizing external inputs and avoiding synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. In some countries, the terms "biological" or "ecological" farming are

used interchangeably with organic farming to describe the system more precisely. Over the past decade, consumer preferences have shifted significantly, driven by the perception that organic products are healthier and eco-friendly (Wei, Liu, She, & Wu, 2022). It's important to note that sustainable methods, such as organic farming, consider human, environmental, and animal health, unlike the technologies of the Green Revolution (Behera et al., 2012). Organic food is produced through farming methods that avoid synthetic chemicals like human-made pesticides and fertilizers and do not involve genetically modified organisms (GMOs) (Duram, 2019). Consequently, organic food is considered healthy because its production does not involve synthetic chemicals (Suprpto & Wijaya, 2012).

The cost of producing organic foods

Organic producers, including farmers and farming firms, typically encounter lower yields and higher production costs compared to their conventional (non-organic) counterparts. Seufert et al. (2012) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis to evaluate the yield performance of organic versus conventional farming systems, finding that organic yields are generally 5% to 34% lower than those of conventional farming. The higher production costs for organic food arise from the restrictions on using certain pesticides and fertilizers, necessitating greater labor inputs and increased expenses for fertility management, weed control, and pest and disease control.

Growth in the demand for organic foods

Despite the higher costs, the consumption of organic food has grown rapidly over the past two decades. Global sales of organic food increased from \$23 billion in 2002 to \$63 billion in 2011, making up 1–2% of total food production worldwide (Cunha and Moura, 2004; Ag Professional, 2013). This growth can be partially attributed to consumers' significant concerns about personal health and the environment, as organic production aligns with these concerns. The high nutritional value of organic foods and awareness of the risks associated with certain diet-related diseases contribute to the health motivation behind organic consumption (Cavaliere, Peri, and Banterle, 2016). Additionally, the belief that organic farming addresses the sustainability issues of conventional farming, such as soil degradation, nutrient runoff, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and pesticide-related damage, supports the sustainability motivation for consuming organic products (Brzezina, Kopainsky, and Mathijs, 2016). On the demand side, consumers are willing to pay a premium for organic food, which typically costs 10% to several times more than non-organic food (Winter and Davis, 2006). However, in some countries, a lack of consumer trust hinders the development of the organic food market. While organic production systems have a long history, they have gained popularity more recently, with demand for organic products increasing steadily, particularly in developed countries (Rehber, Turhan, & Vural, 2018). Organic foods are becoming globally popular among consumers. The worldwide organic food market, valued at USD 167.85 billion in 2020, is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.59%, reaching USD 368.94 billion by 2026 (TechSci, 2021). Consumer research is crucial in the production and marketing of organic products. Recent data from

the Organic Trade Association indicates that organic sales in the US reached \$61.9 billion in 2020, marking a 12.4% increase (compared to a 5% increase in 2019). Non-organic foods did not experience the same significant growth as organic foods. The global pandemic changed consumer habits, leading to more home cooking and increased shopping at local and large-scale markets (Organic Trade Association, 2022). A study in Italy found that during the pandemic, people turned to farmers or organic purchasing groups for fruits and vegetables (Di Renzo et al., 2020). Another study conducted during the pandemic revealed that participants mainly consumed fruits and vegetables and reduced their intake of meat and dairy products. The main drivers for consuming organic products included environmental concerns, supporting local producers, and reducing the use of harmful substances like pesticides, while the higher price of organic products was the main deterrent (Pires et al., 2021).

Factors affecting the demand for organic foods

Knowledge and Information

Consumer knowledge of organic food, also referred to as awareness of organic food, involves understanding all the characteristics of these products. If individuals lack information or experience, they are unlikely to try organic products (Muhammad et al., 2017). However, consumer knowledge about organic food is a challenging issue, as many people cannot distinguish between organic and safe food (Moustier et al., 2006). This lack of knowledge directly influences attitudes towards organic food and purchase intentions. According to Michaelidou & Hassan (2008) and Le-Anh & Nguyen-To (2020), this awareness has a strong positive impact on customers' perceptions and considerations regarding organic food.

Attitude towards Organic Foods

According to Nguyen and Lobo (2017), attitude can be seen as the predominant that leads to the pro-environmental intention and behavior. Ajzen (1991) used to explain through the Theory of Planned Behavior that the positive attitudes are inclined to perform purchase intention. Thus, Lee (2009) emphasized that attitude is the remarkable factor of consumers' green purchase. Furthermore, several studies also support for that positive relationship between attitudes and purchase intention (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008) while some other has the contrary conclusion that attitude towards organic products has the insignificant impact on the purchase intention (Nedra et al., 2015).

Other factors

There are many factors which affect the purchase of organic food products. Health is one of the strongest motivation to buy organic food (Chen, 2009). Consumer today had become more health conscious. They are searching for healthy food as they were recommended by Doctors. (Lea, 2005) found that health as the prime motive for purchase of organic food. The other factor which affect the purchase of organic food were environment, taste etc. Health benefit was the reason to buy organic food (Shepherd, 2005). The consumers of Italy and Sweden's motive to purchase organic food depends on its taste (Zanoli, 2004). The factor which affect the attitude, perception and consumption of organic food product in Greece is based on health and environment (Tsakiridou, 2008). Nutrition and health benefit are important factors considered to purchase organic food (Brzezinska, Rapca, Zuchowski, &

Bórawski, 2017).(Irandoost, 2016).” Price and income play important role in consumption of organic food products in Sweden. Even though organic food products had its own advantage of consuming, but the concept was yet not accepted by the consumers.”

It can be said that when the consumers pay more attention to the organic food, it will create a chance for the sustainable development of this business especially in the emerging markets. According to OECD (2019), Vietnam is a potential emerging market in Asia that converges many micro and macro factors to ensure the sustainable development. “The figures from Q&Me also support the results of the studies on the attitudes toward the organic food, and Vietnamese’s intention of purchasing organic food published in the same year (T. N. Nguyen, Lobo, et al., 2017) when they all concluded that food safety, healthiness and nutrition are three most essential factors that directly affect the Vietnamese customers’ decision on organic food.

However, the high interest does not mean that there is high proportion of consumers in community; Instead, Q&Me (2018) stated that major customers and consumers of organic food in Vietnam belong to the high-income people while high proportion of the customers do not have exact knowledge about this type of food, and sometimes they cannot distinguish the difference between organic food and non-organic food. The purchase of organic food was highly influenced by awareness of organic food products. Until and unless proper steps are taken awareness cannot be created.” Teng and Wang (2015) concluded that more information and knowledge provided on organic food will influence attitude, purchase intention and trust of consumers to buy organic food. Awareness of organic food was still less in china and also there is need to increase the availability of organic food products in china (Jue chen, 2014). Even in Ecuador the awareness of organic food is still less and price was the factor which is considered while purchasing organic food (de Esteban Curiel, J., Castro, J. C., & Quisimalín, M., 2015).(Garcia-Gallego, 2011) In order to create awareness among consumers campaigning plays very important role as it will motivate consumers to spend more on green products. Purchase of organic food was influenced by socio-economic factor and the presence or absence of particular food attribute (Benjamin M.Onyango, 2007).

Today’s consumer is very environment conscious and are buying green products. Fruit & Vegetables are highly preferred green products (Saranya, 2018). A study done in Coimbatore regarding green marketing reveals that there are 9% of the respondents who prefer organic food products (Divya Prabha, 2018). Consumers who are health conscious and socially responsible shows favorable attitude towards organic food product (Aslihan Nasir, 2014). Belgium consumers had positive attitude towards consumption of organic vegetables (Aertsens, 2011). In India health, availability and education positively influence the consumer attitude towards buying organic food (Paul, 2012). “Research on the perception of consumers has identified factors that influence consumers’ organic food consumption behaviour, which can be categorized as intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic factors include features (the quality, shelf life, nutritional value and taste of the food) of the food that cannot be changed without altering the product.” On the other hand, extrinsic factors are external to the product such as market, social beliefs, environment, availability and location of purchase (Brata et al. 2022). Additionally, the origin (animal/plant-based) of the food can be a factor that impacts the consumers’ perception

towards organic foods. It has been reported that consumers tend to buy more plant-based organic foods (organic vegetables and fruits), when compared with animal-based organic foods (dairy products and fish) (Malissiova et al. 2022). “The studies on perception of the consumers for plant-based organic foods have shown that the reasons why organic ones are preferred to conventional ones are that they do not contain/contain a very low amount of pesticides, do not to use genetically modified organisms, have a higher nutritional value, and the interests in supporting local producers and contributing to local economic development. Similar motivation factors have been reported in studies regarding animal-based organic foods and consumers’ perception. Additionally, it is significant to point out that animal welfare is one of the main reasons for the consumers to purchase organic animal-based products considering the conditions of conventional poultry and dairy farming.” The health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids have been extensively shown in the literature (Al-Madhagy et al. 2023). Regardless of being of animal/plant origin, consumers pay attention to products which have a higher nutrition value. Both organic dairy products and meat have higher omega-3 fatty acid content than their conventional counterparts, although different results have been reported in the literature (Popovi et al. 2011). Recently, there has been a drastic interest towards vegan diets mostly due to environmental concerns as well as animal health and well-being. Hence, consumers may be more inclined to choose plant-based organic products over animal-based organic products (Alcorta et al. 2021).

‘The eating habits and lifestyle changes of consumers can be affected by many factors such as health, social, economic, and cultural factors. One of the main focus areas of marketing researchers is to examine these factors and identify the determinants of consumer behaviours. ‘It has been shown that the main determining factors in the purchasing decisions of individuals are socio-demographic, psychological, physical, behavioural and cognitive characteristics, in addition to health, convenience, and sensory appeal (i.e., taste/flavour) (Rizzo et al. 2023). The factors responsible for purchase and consumption of organic foods can thus be classified in two categories namely Intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic factors include quality (safety, healthy), shelf life, nutritional value, and taste. The extrinsic factors include market (Price, promotion), social beliefs, environment concern, availability, purchase location, income, and awareness.

Perceived Barriers in buying the organic foods

Numerous initiatives have been undertaken globally to promote the growth and consumption of organic food products. However, several factors continue to hinder their purchase. A primary reason for not buying organic food is a lack of awareness and knowledge (Demeritt, 2002). Marketers, along with the support of the government, NGOs, and farmers, must take steps to raise awareness about organic food. Other barriers include availability, lack of trust, price, satisfaction with conventional food, and a lack of perceived value (Biemans, 2011). In Germany, the main reasons for not buying organic food are price, insufficient availability, and quality (Buder, 2014). In Malaysia, government efforts to raise awareness and address knowledge gaps have been identified as factors hindering the purchase of organic food (Ahmad, 2010). Pham (2019) highlighted that purchase intentions or actual purchase behaviors for organic products are often influenced by certain barriers. Price consciousness is a common perceived barrier, with high prices being a significant reason for not purchasing organic food (van Doorn & Verhoef, 2015). According to Q&Me

(2018), most green product consumers belong to the high-income class due to the higher cost of these products. A related study found that Chinese consumers were willing to pay a 4.5 percent premium above the basic price for eco-labeled items, compared to a 6.6 percent premium for American consumers (Chan, 1999). Additionally, other internal and external factors contribute to preventing people from purchasing organic food. These include insufficient information, lack of eco-labeling on products, and poor green marketing efforts to promote the products (T. N. Nguyen, Phan, et al., 2017). Le-Anh and Nguyen-To (2020) also emphasized that purchase intentions are significantly affected by supply restrictions and lack of trust, even if consumers have a positive attitude towards organic food. In Vietnam, a scandal involving Bach Hoa Xanh has exacerbated the issue of customer trust in organic and clean food, directly and negatively impacting purchase intentions.

Conclusion

The aforementioned research studies highlight various elements of organic foods, focusing on the factors that influence consumer preferences towards organic foods and the barriers affecting their demand. However, this study has some limitations. It reviews only a limited number of papers on the topic. Future researchers might consider reviewing a broader range of studies to identify additional factors that drive preferences for organic foods over conventional options, such as a history of illness in the family or recommendations from doctors. This study has implications for marketers of organic foods. It can help them understand and explore ways to segment and target the organic food market effectively. In conclusion, given the significant health benefits of organic foods, marketers need to educate customers, build their trust, and ensure a consistent supply of organic foods to foster demand growth.

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