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Organic Food Consumption Among Urban Consumers: Preliminary Results

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Abstract

The consumption of organic food is on the rise due to increasing health consciousness among Malaysians regarding food intake, as well as to the growth of the organic agricultural sector in this country. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate Malaysian consumers' awareness and intention towards organic food consumption. A questionnaire survey was conducted for this study and the questionnaire was distributed to respondents in the townships of Shah Alam and Subang Jaya. Early results show respondents are highly aware of organic food, they find organic food to be good for their health as well as have the intention to purchase organic food products for their families.

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1. Introduction

Organic food product consumption is on the rise among consumers all over the world. This rising purchasing pattern is due to the heightened level of consumer awareness on food safety, and health concerns. In addition, increased responsibility towards our mother nature has also enticed people to change to organic food products. In Malaysia, organic food still remains a niche market, but one that is growing rapidly. The growing demand can be seen with the increase in the number of organic farming and producers. In 2001, for instance, only 131 hectares (ha)

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in Malaysia were organic farms. In the next five years, the land area for organic farms rapidly grew by 18 times to 2,367 ha, of which 962 ha are perhaps certified organic, as surveyed by the Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and the Foundation Ecology & Farming (SOEL), Germany, in 2007.

Due to the organic food product development, it is therefore important to identify the issues and challenges associated with the organic food product market in Malaysia. The South-East Asian Market for Organic Food & Drink in 2006 reported that market growth was restrained for organic food products in Malaysia due to low consumer awareness of organic foods. Today, even though the level of awareness has improved, Malaysians have not yet fully understood what organic foods are and how organic food products differ from conventional foods (Zeinab & Seyedeh, 2012). The understanding of organic foods is crucial in enhancing the level of awareness and purchase intention of customers. Hill and Lynchehaun (2002) agree with this fact due to their discovery that knowledge is a major element in affecting the decision to buy products that are organic. In summary, this paper examined Malaysian consumers' awareness and intention to purchase and consume organic food products, as well as the appropriate marketing strategies that could be adopted to increase the sale of organic products in the country.

1.1. Objectives of the study

Objective 1 : To determine the awareness of organic food products among Malaysian customers

Objective 2 : To determine the purchase intention of organic food products among Malaysian customers

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organic Food

Organic food was described as "food guaranteed to have been produced, stored, and processed without adding synthetic fertilizers and chemicals" (Lockie, et al., 2002). In addition, Chinnici, D'Amico, and Pecorino (2002) defined organic products as food which is cultivated via a process that is environmentally friendly. Furthermore, the National Organic Standards Board of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2008) also established a national standard for the term "organic". It is defined by how it cannot be made rather than how it can be made, must be produced without the use of sewer-sludge fertilizers, most synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, genetic engineering (biotechnology), growth hormones, irradiation and antibiotics. Products which are listed as organic are produced in line with standard rights in all areas of production and are awarded a certificate by an industrial body (Lyons, et al., 2001).

2.2 Awareness Towards Organic Food

Consumers worldwide are increasingly concerned about nutrition, health and the quality of their food (Gil et al., 2000). The awareness of health related issue has increased the organic food demand. Phuah et al., (2011) stated that an increase in the consumer awareness of the health and nutritious value of food has increased the demand for functional food, organic food, green food and natural food. With health related problems such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and coronary heart diseases on the rise, consumers are becoming more aware of the effects of their eating habits and also with the increase in environmental awareness (Shaw, Shiu, & Clarke, 2000). Based on the Country Report (Consumer Foodservice in Malaysia), consumers are becoming increasingly aware of health related matters. Thus, the Malaysian government has developed a wide range of campaigns to instil the idea of health consciousness which have persuaded consumers to switch their preferences to healthier foods offered by several restaurants. As a result of these campaigns, many Malaysians have slowly begun to consume organic food products. Furthermore, the awareness towards environmental protection can also increase the organic food consumption. Also, studies by Werner and Alvensleben (2011) found a relationship between the amount of customers' concern for the environment and their motivation to buy products that are organic.

2.3 Purchase Intention On Organic Food Products

Purchase intention on organic food is explained by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Intention is the cognitive representation of a person's readiness to perform a given behavior, and it is considered to be the

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