



Consumer behavior and purchase intention for organic food: A review and research agenda



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Consumer attitude
Purchase intention
Organic food
Organic farming
Green products

ABSTRACT

In this article, we review and discuss the factors, which affect the change in the consumer behavior towards organic food. We extract findings from various studies conducted in different countries and analyze those factors and provide suggestions for future research. We find that health-conscious consumers show a growing preference for organic food over the conventionally grown food. This shift in the attitude of the modern consumers is greatly influenced by the rising incidence of lifestyle diseases, such as heart disorders and depression. The need to purchase organic food to improve the quality of life will have huge implications for the retail, distribution and marketing functions of business.

1. Introduction

In the late twentieth century, the world witnessed a paradigm shift in the reach of education and in the attitude of people towards life. As part of this shift, there was a marked increase in the preference for organic food. Traditionally, many farmers were unaware of the modern and scientific food production techniques and thus, they did not use synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or other crop-preserving chemicals in the process of food production. They used to grow pesticide-free food for self-consumption only. In fact, this consumption of organic food was symbolic of the ethical value system (Groszlik, 2016).

Then, a trend emerged between 1940s and 1960s when farmers shifted to more efficient and intensive food production techniques, which involved the use of advanced methods. This trend flourished despite the knowledge of the benefits of organic food. The reason for this is attributed to the increase in human population coupled with the devastating famines in certain parts of the world, which mandated higher production of food. Bolstered by Industrialization and improvements in agricultural chemicals, the farmers shifted to such forms of food production. As a result, organic farming took a backseat, and consumers began purchasing conventionally grown food because of its sheer abundance and lower prices (Mutlu, 2007).

Eventually, the indiscriminate use of chemicals led to environmental deterioration. Also, the commercial objectives, which led to the use of hazardous pesticides and chemical fertilizers in the farms and agricultural land meant that consumers were buying food and food

products without any nutritional value. The high incidence of lifestyle diseases, such as diabetes and heart disorders, raised an alarm which made consumers realize the importance of food quality and safety (Menrad, 2003; Roberfroid, 2002). Many consumers, these days, believe in the motto “You are what you eat” — a perception that has highly contributed to the increase in demand for organic food (Norman et al., 2000). With both consumers and farmers thinking about returning to organically grown and environmentally friendly products, organic food is gaining acceptance not only in developed countries of Europe and North America, but also in developing countries such as China and India (Patel et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2016).

The shift in consumer attitude occurred because organic food has fulfilled the expectations of modern consumers. Organic agriculture combines several practices including the application of organic fertilizers, locally adapted seeds/breeds, biological pest control and intercropping with nitrogen-fixing trees, or legumes, or with other synergistic crops (Adamtey et al., 2016). Also, consumers can afford to purchase organic food to attain better quality of life due to the commensurate growth in their disposable income (Kriwy and Mecking, 2012). All this has led some marketers to promote their products as being healthy which is different from the promotional efforts associated with the hedonic foods (Bublitz and Peracchio, 2015). They argued that adapting successful industry practices to promote a healthy shift in the eating habits of consumers will help businesses producing such healthy products to thrive. For this, marketers need to know about the prospective consumers to whom they can promote organic food. Moreover,

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they want to know what factors will influence the purchase decisions of such consumers. But the above literature does not throw light on the consumer segments willing to purchase the organic food.

To identify and target the consumers of organic food, we need to understand their outlook and the factors, which affect their outlook. This will help to understand the most important considerations, which shape the behavior of organic food consumers. Moreover, it will provide a detailed analytical framework for the reasons, which cause change in attitude of consumers towards organic food. In this context, the objectives of the study can be specified as follows i) Assess the reasons which underlie the shift in the attitude of consumers towards organic food ii) Cluster the important factors that affect consumer attitude and behavior towards organic food. iii). Identify the factors, which are not given much importance in making positive the attitude of the consumer towards organic food. Identify the research gaps in literature and key issues to be researched in the future for making organic food more popular.

In order to address these objectives, this article is structured in sections given as follows: Section 2 deals with the objectives of the study. Methodology is outlined in Section 3. Overview and trends are given in Section 4. The findings are discussed in Section 5. A new framework is developed in Section 6 which could serve as a benchmark for organizations dealing with the organic food. Section 7 provides directions for future research. Section 8 carries the concluding observations.

2. Method

To address the objectives, we reviewed extant research to understand the primary factors behind the shift in the consumer attitude towards organic food. We adopted various steps in selecting the related literature for this review. First, we used the methods adopted in prior review articles (Canabal and White, 2008; Terjesen et al., 2016) and conducted a broad search for organic food and interdisciplinary literature published in the last 30 years (i.e., 1985–2015), which included online databases as well as reference lists of the articles. We used keywords such as organic food, consumers' attitude towards organic food, purchase intention for organic food, demand for organic food, etc. Further, we downloaded more than 400 articles published since 1985 from databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO and Social Science Research Network. After careful consideration and selection, we short-listed core articles to be included in this review based on the criteria used in prior reviews and the discussion among the co-authors.

The final sample consists of 146 research articles, which identify organic food consumers and their attitudes, beliefs, purchase intention and behavior as published in journals which are either listed in the Social Science Citation Index, or in SCOPUS. As government reports are non-commercial and have greater authenticity, we also covered some government papers from websites such as United States Department of Agriculture. We chose the last three decades (1985–2015) as the time for the review to encompass all the important factors and variables that influence consumer behavior and purchase intention for organic food. We did not include research on associated areas such as soil fertility, chemical fertilizers, etc. so as to focus only on organic food. We reviewed and interpreted those research articles, which contributed to our understanding of organic food, consumers' attitude towards it and farmers' satisfaction level in producing organic food. For understanding the importance of factors identified in the context of various countries, we have highlighted some prior studies that have identified such factors contributing to the shift in consumers' attitude.

3. Literature and theory

This section provides an overview and general trends related to organic food, which will help us to understand the nature of organic food and its standing in the minds of consumers.

3.1. An overview

3.1.1. Organic food

Organic food encompasses natural food items which are free from artificial chemicals such as fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms. Additionally, organic food is not subjected to irradiation (Marwa and Scott, 2013). Thus, Organic food is considered healthy because synthetic chemicals are not used in its production (Suprpto and Wijaya, 2012). Literature shows that many terms are used to refer to organic food, such as “natural,” “local,” “fresh,” and “pure” (Chan, 2001). Organic farming has always been a healthy option to produce followed by at least some farmers all over the world (Canavari and Olson, 2007).

3.1.2. Consumer attitude and behavior

Attitude is the most important predictor of intention to buy organic food and the relation between attitude and intention has been found to be positive and significant (Kozup et al., 2003). Besides attitude, subjective and personal norms also influence the consumption of organic food (Aertsens et al., 2009a, 2009b). In the following text, some of the critical factors, which contribute to the formation of attitude and behavior of consumers have been described.

The presence of packaged food labels which carry nutritional information and health claims strongly influences the attitude and purchase intentions. Consumers have a more favorable attitude toward products with detailed label descriptions and nutrition information (Kozup et al., 2003). Such efforts make today's consumers more aware and concerned about their healthy lifestyle. They wish to engage in healthy behavior and eat nourishing food (Gould, 1988; Baker et al., 2004).

Ethical issues form another important factor as it is believed that people guide their behavior on account of concern for environment and animal welfare. The greater the concern about such issues, the higher is the probability that people will consume healthy food (Honkanen et al., 2006). Most people have the impression that organic food is an ethical product (Crane, 2001). Despite Alwitt and Pitts (1996) indicating that positive attitude towards environment does not have any bearing on the purchase intention of buyers, many consumers not only believe in fair trade practices but also they wish to buy products that have been made by producers in an ethical manner. Such ethical considerations also affect suppliers as these factors determine both their market size and market segment (Moore, 2004).

Auger et al. (2003) focused on ethical consumerism that encompasses the importance of social components of a company's products. Consumers were interested to consume only those products, which were safe for the society. Doran (2009) emphasized that fair trade knowledge, perceived quantity and quality of fair trade information and overall concern influences buying behavior directly as well as indirectly. The important determinants of ethical consumption hinge on social standing, adoption of fair trade, environmental concern and a religiously cohesive outlook (Doran and Natale, 2011).

As a consequence of the above factors, consumers' interest in healthy food has increased manifold. Across product categories, there is still variation in the importance of motives and barriers relating to consumer behavior towards organic food (Padel and Foster, 2005).

3.1.3. Supply and demand

In the field of organic food, there have been imbalances in the supply and demand situation (Oger et al., 2001). These imbalances have to be dealt with in a suitable manner to ensure a stable ground for the marketing organic food in the future. We know that as the supply of organic food decreases, so does the demand (Gil et al., 2000). On the supply side, farmers are hesitant in adopting organic farming because of various reasons such as complicated and expensive certification process, poor financial viability, limited market size and lack of direct sales channels (Groff et al., 1993; Harris et al., 2000; Valerian et al., 2011).

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