The Dilemma of Purchase Intention: 
A Conceptual Framework for Understanding 
Actual Consumption of Organic Food

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how many past studies have assessed the consumption behavior by employing purchase intention drivers/motivational factors of organic food as a proxy to foster organic food consumption. However, the preceding studies’ foci do not embrace the consumption itself where purchasing may come secondary to consumption decisions. Consumption reflects high involvement with the product; and the barriers and motivations are as real as the product itself, which makes it an ideal moment to examine the motivation. Also, there is a lack of effort in re-assessing theories of planned behavior by extending it or incorporating time orientation, different dimensions of attitude and organic food quality attributes to increase and improve understanding of actual organic food consumption behavior. Hence, the objective of this article is to propose an ideal approach and develop a conceptual framework to examine factors influencing organic food consumption. This article provides insight and a better understanding of actual consumption of organic food and adds a new momentum to the growing literature.

KEYWORDS

Extrinsic Quality Cue, Future Orientation, Organic Food Consumption, Purchase Intention, Sensory Appeal, Theory of Planned Behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

Exploitation and destruction of the environment and natural resources have raised awareness of environmental protection, which in turn has encouraged “green consumerism” (Moisander, 2007). Due to this condition, over the last 15 years, the practice of organic agriculture and organic food, in general, has gained a huge interest. Organic agriculture sustains the health of people, the ecosystem, and the soil. According to the National Organic Standards Board of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), organic food provides long-term benefits to both the environment and people based on its emphasis on producing nutritious food through the conservation of soil and water and use of renewable resources to enhance environmental quality.

According to the latest global data on organic farming as presented in the 2016 edition entitled “The World of Organic Agriculture” by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and the International Foundation for Organic Agriculture (IFOAM), at the end of 2014 more than 43.7 million hectares of agricultural land was recognized as organic producing with an approximate growth of 0.5 million hectares from the year 2013 having reached 80 billion US Dollars of economic value (Willer and Lernoud, 2016). Malaysia as being the subject of this study is among the countries that have the smallest share of the organic agricultural area (0.002 million hectares) accounting for only

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0.02 percent of the total agricultural land (DOA, 2015), covering a total of 151 certified organic farms (Suhaimee et al., 2016).

Despite the growth in organic food agriculture and a large number of studies investigating factors driving consumer purchasing intention of organic food, yet the organic food market share and consumer expenditure share of organic food and beverages are relatively low (FiBL-AMI, 2014). Belz and Peattie (2009) describe this problem by summarizing it is perhaps the most consistent finding which is inconsistency between what people claim (or express via values, attitudes, etc.) and what their actual behavior – the so-called “attitude-behavior” or green gap in consumer’s organic food purchasing behavior and intention (e.g. Moser, 2015; Gleim and Lawson, 2014). In fact, individuals surveyed by Greenindex (2012) who identify themselves as ‘environmentally-friendly’ are reported to be significantly higher by 50% than the actual ‘environmentally friendly’ purchasers (Greenindex, 2012). Thus, many current researchers call for further investigation to address this challenge to help minimize or narrow the green gap that hinders consumers from translating their intention and attitude into practice through monitoring actual behavior to avoid the potential bias of their stated intention (Moser, 2015; Gleim and Lawson, 2014).

Various psychological/behavior theories have been applied to incorporate more dimension to investigate factors that form the intention and drive behavior to purchase organic food, however, the gap is still evident today. Given this fact, (Moisander et al., 2010) recommended observing broader consumer behavior changes rather than focusing solely on individual purchases. Miniero et al., (2014) also point to the idea that marketing studies mainly focused on the intention to buy rather than on effective consumer choice. However, there has been a lack of effort in re-assessing the possible factors influencing actual consumption rather than just the purchase intention of organic food. Past studies mostly focused on investigating the motivational factors to purchase or intention to purchase organic food as a proxy to foster organic food consumption; thus it is argued that preceding studies’ focus does not readily embrace the consumption itself where purchasing may come secondary to consumption decision/motivation. While a percentage of purchasing intention is realized through the actual purchasing behavior of the product that ultimately leads to consumption; if such approach is reversed to start with actual consumption behavior which is succeeded by purchasing behavior only then the gap can be narrowed. Furthermore, it is important to remember that food is a daily consumed product which means reoccurring consumption is very solid and strong predictor of reoccurring purchasing behavior.

In addition, organic food consumption is suffering over the years from conflicting definitions and inconsistencies in operationalization which is rather confused with organic purchase intention and behavior. The majority of past studies operationalize organic food consumption as purchase intention or purchase behavior and adopt and adapt measurement of purchase intention/behavior rather than readily measure consumption behavior. Reisch (2010) defines sustainable food consumption including organic food as a choice and use of food which is beneficial and life-enhancing for individuals, society and the planet (Reisch, 2010). It can be seen that consumption deals with the actual usage of the product and not merely the intention to purchase. Several other scholars also make the point that in its own definition, sustainable consumption of food or other environmentally friendly products lies in its usage or consumption of products with lower environmental impacts (Pinto et al., 2014; Gordon et al., 2011). Therefore, researchers should be more cautious with their usage of organic food consumption when they are only investigating the purchase intention or purchase behavior and not treat it similar to consumption and not confidently conclude their finding to foster organic food consumption as both actions differ greatly. Moreover, there is a flaw in the methodology design regarding approach in administrating survey by including individuals who were considering to buy organic food and or who were aware of organic food and this is rather not representative of those who consume organic food. Thus, future researchers investigating factors driving organic consumption should assess consumption through the frequency of eating organic food and not purchase intention
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