



A case study on beliefs of Organic food consumers

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, consumers are attempting to make conscious food decisions and favour organic food over its alternatives. An increasing number of research studies show the interest of the academic sector in exploring this changed attitude. Due to their importance in attitude formation, the need arises to comprehend the beliefs of the organic food consumers in depth. The current study tries to explore consumers' beliefs (behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs) about organic food in detail. As the exploration of these beliefs requires specific observations, this study is based on qualitative data focusing on consumers' beliefs about organic food. Data is collected through personal interviews with the respondents in five cities of Punjab and Haryana with a total of 20 participants. Results indicate that consumers perceive organic food as healthy, chemical-free and tasty. High price emerged as a major control belief which limits their purchase and family is most influential in their purchase decisions. The results imply that a quantitative study on beliefs about organic food would be useful to investigate these findings in a larger sample since these findings have several marketing and advertising implications.

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Introduction

Consumers now try to make conscious food decisions and favour organic food over its alternatives since it combats climate change by emitting fewer greenhouse gases and reducing pollution from synthetic fertilisers (Pang et al., 2019). To understand attitude and purchase intention towards organic food, we need to comprehend the beliefs of the consumers as beliefs about an object serve as the foundation for the attitude formation towards that object. Despite the fact that the significance of beliefs has often been acknowledged in past studies, the formation or acquisition of beliefs has received less attention in the study of attitudes (Flanders et al., 1975). Also, understanding beliefs become necessary since attitudes are typically measured by the assessment of a person's beliefs. It is obvious that the processes of belief formation need to be examined in order to account for the change in attitudes and intentions (Flanders et al., 1975). The foundations for developing the primary determinants must be considered in a comprehensive explanation of human behaviour. Specific observations are needed in order to explore behavioural beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs. (Zagata, 2012).

Research Objectives

The study tries to explore consumers' beliefs that are the foundation of the underlying constructs (attitude, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control) in the TPB model (Zagata, 2012). The first research objective is to study the behavioural beliefs of organic food consumers. The second research objective is to find out the normative beliefs of organic food consumers. The third research objective is to identify the control beliefs of organic food consumers.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following three research questions.

Why do consumers prefer organic food? (behavioural beliefs of organic food consumers) Who encourages them to purchase? (normative beliefs of

organic food consumers) What obstacles limit their purchase? (control beliefs of organic food consumers)

Review of Literature

Beliefs about behaviour influence one's attitude toward that behaviour (Zagata, 2012). The foundations for developing the primary determinants must also be considered in a comprehensive explanation of human behaviour. Therefore, the beliefs are incorporated into the Theory of Planned Behaviour by Ajzen as they support each of the three key determinants of intention to purchase. Because people's attitudes are shaped by particular ideas about the characteristics of a particular item and personal appraisal, the study of these beliefs helps to identify the connection between personal values and attitudes. (Zagata, 2012).

Beliefs

In general, beliefs are a person's subjective probabilistic assessments of some distinguishable feature of his world; they have to do with how that person perceives himself and his surroundings. (Flanders et al., 1975). Beliefs (behavioural, normative and control) explain the reasons behind why and how consumers hold given attitudes, subjective norms and perceived control over organic food consumption (Zagata, 2012). Specifically, belief is defined as the subjective likelihood of a relationship of the object of the belief with some other object, concept, value or attribute. Thus, a person may think that he or she has specific qualities (such as intelligence, honesty, or punctuality), that a certain action will have a certain result, that a certain series of events will occur, etc. (Flanders et al., 1975).

Behavioural beliefs

The actual attitude is shaped by the consumer's subjective importance (value) and thoughts about how this action will benefit him or her (for example, by enhancing his or her health). It was found that the most significant factor in determining attitudes toward organic food is still the belief that organic food is safer than non-organic food. (Bai et al., 2019). Among the other,

most popular are ecological welfare and health benefits (Lee & Goudeau, 2015). Organic products are believed to be free from harmful chemical residues by consumers. (Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013) Beliefs about organic food as “luxuries for the rich,” “upscale,” and the targets of “commercial hype”— were also found as significant factors in determining attitudes toward organic food (Bai et al., 2019).

Normative beliefs

The consumer’s perceived social pressure to consume organic food is based on subjective beliefs about whether they intend to buy organic food. The desire to conform to these expectations comes from the consumer’s expectations of social actors who have an impact on his or her decisions, such as his or her partner or children (Zagata, 2012).

Control beliefs

The consumer’s perception of control over consumption has an influence on their intention to purchase organic food. The subjectively seen obstacles (such as the perception that organic food is too expensive) and chances to get around these restraints are where the perceived behavioural control comes from (Zagata, 2012).

Role of beliefs in organic food consumption

Through a meta-analysis, Massey et al., 2018 examine factors influencing the purchase of organic food taking a sample of 124,353 consumers which are reported in 150 manuscripts over the time period of 1991 to 2016. Intention to purchase is stronger when consumers have higher perceptions regarding the taste, nutrition, impacts on the environment and animal welfare, health, quality, safety, and price of organic food. Another study

‘Zagata, 2012’ utilized the representative data set of 1054 Czech Republic respondents. The study’s target group is the frequent buyers of organic food in the Czech Republic. It was found that consumers are convinced that organic food products are high in vitamins and nutrients and have been prepared without artificial additives and GMOs. The study also found that availability and variety of products are not perceived as major barriers to the purchase of organic food, but the ease of purchase (i.e., availability of organic food) obviously influences consumers’ intentions to buy organic food. Families play a significant role in influencing consumer behaviour.

Methodology

The research design was standardised to ensure uniformity. Each interview followed the identical method, and the respondents answered the same questions in the same order. Three questions are part of the framework. Each of them are related to the research questions (see Appendix). The conversations were transcriptions, which are then content-analyzed to answer the research questions. The author has examined the transcripts and translated them into English (from Hindi and Punjabi). We do not identify the participants by name to safeguard their privacy, but rather by number so that it is clear that we are citing different persons (Costa et al., 2014). 20 respondents, 4 each from Amritsar, Faridabad, Gurugram, Jalandhar and Ludhiana were interviewed by the author. Selected cities are the only smart cities of Panjab and Haryana. The reason behind choosing their two cities is the arising demand of organic food purchased from these cities according to previous research studies (Mehra and Ratna, 2014). Participants completed a brief questionnaire on demographic information first. The interviewer then started each interview using the same format: introductions, the research’s objective, how it was organised, informed consent, assurances of confidentiality, questions, and approval to continue.

Table: Beliefs mentioned by respondents in interviews Beliefs

Promotes sustainable	No. of	No. of	No. of
Behavioural Belief	Respondents	Normative Belief	Respondents
		Control Belief	Respondents

development 2 Family 10 Expensive 15
 Environment-friendly 2 partner 5 Lack of variety 3
 Lack of chemicals 5 Friend 3 Unavailability 2 Tasty 3
 Colleague 2 - - More nutrients 3 Children 2 - - Healthy
 12 - - - -

Animal-friendly	1	-	-	-	-

Discussion

In behavioural beliefs, a belief that organic food is healthy is the most popular behavioural among the respondents (as found by (Żakowska-Biemans, 2011; Gracia & De Magistris, 2007; Lee & Goudeau, 2015). The second important belief is the absence of chemicals in organic food already found by Misra & Singh, 2016 and Zagata, 2014. For instance, P11 says: ‘I want to stay away from diseases, organic food will save my future expenses on medication, as there are very high chances of illness due to food with toxic substances’. 3 respondents gave taste as the reason for purchasing organic food. P 16 described the taste benefit of organic food as ‘I didn’t get that taste from non-organic food items, which I get from organic ones’. Nutrients are also as important as taste according to data. Consumers consider organic food as environment-friendly, one of the respondents (P2) said that organic food helps us to save our planet, soil and biodiversity, which is the need of the hour. Only 1 respondent (P 13) believes that organic food helps to save animals, in her words ‘there are some birds which left this place because of harmful pesticides on crops’, so consumers feel that by consumption of organic food is animal-friendly. Consumers also believe that organic food consumption ‘promotes sustainable development’. Among normative beliefs, family is one of the most common influencers (as found by Zagata, 2012), followed by partners and friends. Colleagues and children, both are mentioned by two respondents. Control belief most prevalent is the high cost of organic food items (as found by Misra & Singh, 2016 from a survey (150) in Delhi NCR) followed by lack of variety and unavailability.

Conclusion

The study aims to identify important behavioural, normative and control beliefs through interviews. Results of the study indicate that consumers believe that organic food is healthy (60% of respondents), chemical-free (25% of respondents) and tasty (15% of respondents). High price (75% of respondents) emerged as a major control belief that limits their purchase and family (50% of respondents) is most influential in their purchase.

Implications

Our findings suggest that a quantitative investigation into the beliefs of consumers of organic food would be beneficial to explore these findings in a bigger sample because they have several marketing and promotional implications. As our findings are tied to north India but it would be intriguing to find out if findings from other parts of India would be comparable. Therefore, it could be beneficial to carry out the same analysis as in our study in other regions of India and in other nations.

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Appendix

Main Questions asked during interview? Why do you prefer organic food? Who encourage you to purchase? What obstacles limit your purchase?