

Organic Outlook: Exploring the Drivers of Sustainable Food Choices

Discipline: Commerce

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ABSTRACT

The organic food market has experienced significant growth, driven by changing consumer preferences. With the growing demand for organic food products, understanding consumer preferences is crucial for businesses and policymakers. This study investigates the key drivers and demographic influences shaping consumer attitudes toward organic food. A comprehensive survey of 123 respondents identified key motivators: health considerations (91%), environmental concerns (88%), and preservative avoidance (81%). Contrary to expectations, demographic factors (age and education) did not significantly impact organic preferences or willingness to pay premium prices. These findings suggest a universal appeal for organic products, rooted in shared values and concerns. The study contributes to the understanding of organic consumerism, informing evidence-based marketing strategies and policy initiatives.

Keywords: Organic Food, Consumer Behavior, Sustainable Consumption, Health Consciousness.

Introduction

The world is witnessing rapid industrial development to cater to the growing population's increasing demands. Consequently, agriculture is under pressure to boost crop yields. To achieve this, farmers have relied heavily on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. However, the excessive use of these substances has harmful effects on human health and the environment. Organic farming, a concept introduced by Lord Northbourne in 1839, offers a sustainable alternative. This traditional farming method recycles resources, maintains natural equilibrium, and protects biodiversity. Regulatory bodies govern organic food production, prohibiting certain pesticides and fertilizers. Organic farming conserves soil quality, promotes nutrient-rich crops, and supports ecological balance.

The global organic food market is growing rapidly, driven by consumer awareness of non-organic food's harmful effects. India, with over 15,000 certified organic farms, has immense potential to become a leading organic food producer. The Indian organic food industry is experiencing 20-22% annual growth. Consumers prioritize quality over price, driven by environmental concerns, health awareness, and lifestyle choices. Organic farming's benefits, including environmental sustainability and improved product quality, have led conservative farmers to adopt this approach.

Significance of the study

Consumer behavior significantly influences purchasing decisions, driving demand for organic products in India, which has grown rapidly due to increasing health and lifestyle concerns. The availability of chemical-free, sustainable, and environmentally friendly options has become a key factor, with organic food gaining significance for maintaining ecological balance, preserving freshness, and eliminating artificial preservatives. As consumers prioritize well-being, their willingness to pay a premium for organic products has increased, underscoring the importance of understanding consumer awareness and knowledge. This shift in consumer behavior highlights the need to explore factors such as consumer understanding, willingness to pay, and reasons for choosing organic products, informing strategies that promote sustainable consumption and environmental responsibility.

Literature Review

Fotopoulose et al. (2001) investigated the psychological and socio-economic factors influencing consumer purchasing attitudes towards organic food. The study found that familiarity with organic food, perceived differences between organic and conventional food, and thoughtful purchasing habits were crucial factors. Additionally, the increasing variety of organic products and certification labels significantly influenced purchasing decisions. **Briz and Ward's (2009)** study examined Spanish consumers' awareness of organic food, revealing that 46 percent were familiar with the concept. The researchers found that awareness levels varied significantly across different demographics, with education being the primary influencer. Notably, awareness levels ranged from 29 percent to 71 percent depending on factors such as income, age, and region. **Chakrabarti's**

(2010) study highlighted the crucial role of consumer attitudes in driving the purchase of organic food. Through descriptive and explanatory surveys, the research demonstrated that persuading customers to prioritize organic food products significantly impacted customer loyalty. The research emphasizes the significance of grasping consumer perspectives to effectively navigate the organic food industry. **Padiya and Vala's (2012)** study in Ahmedabad profiled organic food buyers as quality-conscious individuals who prioritize knowledge over price. The researchers found that these consumers primarily gather information from magazines, newspapers, and point-of-purchase materials. This study provides valuable insights into the characteristics and information-seeking behaviors of organic food consumers. **Mehra and Ratna (2014)** explored the factors influencing consumer attitudes towards organic food. Their study identified six significant factors: perception of organic food, health consciousness, product information, value for money, accessibility, and trust. The researchers found that women and younger consumers exhibited a positive attitude towards organic food, perceiving it as a healthier option. **Padmathy and Saraswathy (2016)** conducted a study in Thanjavur district to examine the factors influencing consumer buying behavior for organic products. The findings revealed a significant relationship between environmental concerns and consumers' intention to purchase green products. The findings stress that environmental considerations play a pivotal role in influencing consumer purchasing decisions and habits. **Pandurangarao et al. (2017)** investigated the factors influencing consumer purchasing decisions for organic food. Their study identified ten key factors: labels, health concerns, environmental concerns, brand advertising, safety, accessibility, affordability, freshness, store location, and brand name. The researchers found that health, environment, and safety concerns were the primary drivers of organic food purchases. **Sharma and Singhvi's (2018)** review study provided a comprehensive overview of consumer perceptions toward organic food products. The researchers predicted increasing demand for organically grown food in the near future, emphasizing the need for producers, traders, and governments to focus on niche markets. **Chiciudean's (2019)** study of 568 consumers in Romania identified key barriers to organic food consumption, including price, perishability, and availability. Additional factors influencing demand included mistrust and inadequate promotion. The study

underscores the need for addressing these challenges to increase adoption of organic food products. **Prabha and Tamilselvi (2022)** highlighted a growing consumer preference for organic food products, driven by concerns over health and environmental sustainability. Research indicates that consumers exhibit higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty towards organic products, often influenced by their perceptions of safety and quality compared to non-organic alternatives. Additionally, effective information dissemination about the benefits of organic foods plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and enhancing post-purchase satisfaction.

Statement of the problem

India's growing health-conscious demographic is driving a significant shift towards organic food products, motivated by concerns over chemical contaminants in conventional food. As consumers prioritize wellness, their inclination towards organic alternatives is escalating. Notably, regional variations in organic food market development influence purchasing behaviors. This study focuses on Karunagappally, a region experiencing rapid growth in organic product availability. It seeks to understand the underlying factors driving organic food preference, including prevalence, motivational factors, and the impact of income and educational levels on consumer perception. By exploring these dynamics, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the drivers of organic food adoption in the region.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the relationship between educational qualification and willingness to pay extra for organic food products, investigating whether educational attainment influences premium pricing acceptance
- To investigate the impact of age groups on consumer preferences for organic food products, exploring whether different age categories exhibit distinct motivations for choosing organic options
- To analyze the effect of educational qualification on consumer preference for organic food products over non-organic alternatives, determining if educational level influences organic food adoption

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design, utilizing a survey-based approach to investigate consumer attitudes and preferences towards organic food products. A sample size of 123 respondents was selected through convenience sampling from urban areas. The population comprised individuals with an interest in food choices and purchasing decisions. A structured questionnaire, piloted for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$), assessed demographic information, organic food preferences (Likert scale), and open-ended motivations and barriers. Data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics (chi-square, Pearson's R, Spearman's correlation) using SPSS software.

Analysis and Discussions

This analysis and discussion section delves into the findings of the study, exploring the intricate relationships between consumer perceptions, demographic factors, and organic food preferences. Building on the survey responses of 123 participants, this section examines the extent to which educational qualification and age influence willingness to pay extra for organic products, as well as the underlying motivations driving organic food adoption.

Demographic profile of respondents

The demographic profile of the study's participants provides a snapshot of the characteristics that shape their attitudes and preferences towards organic food products. This section presents an overview of the respondents' age, educational qualification, income level, and other relevant socio-economic factors. By examining the demographic characteristics of the 123 respondents, this study aims to uncover whether age, education, and income influence consumer perceptions and willingness to pay extra for organic products.

Table: 1
Analysis of the Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic Factors	No. of respondents	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Male	59	47.97
Female	64	52.03
<u>Age</u>		
20 - 25	18	14.63
25 – 35	24	19.51
35 – 45	43	34.96
Above 45	38	30.90
<u>Marital Status</u>		
Married	71	57.72
Unmarried	52	42.28
<u>Educational Qualification</u>		
Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC)	32	26.01
Graduate	76	61.78
Postgraduate	15	12.19
<u>Monthly Income</u>		
Less than 10,000	9	7.32
10,000 – 50,000	72	58.54
Above 50,000	42	34.14

(Source: Primary Data)

The survey respondents comprised a balanced mix of males (47.97%) and females (52.03%). The age distribution revealed a majority (34.96%) in the 35-45 age bracket, followed by those above 45 (30.90%). The sample was predominantly married (57.72%) and the data shows that 61.78% of participants have a graduate degree, indicating that higher education may influence the preference for organic products. Those with only a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) make up 26.01%, while postgraduate degree holders represent 12.19%. This suggests that individuals with more education are more likely to choose organic options, reflecting greater awareness of health and environmental issues. In terms of income, the majority (58.54%) earned between ₹ 10,000-50,000 per month, while 34.14% earned above ₹ 50,000. A smaller proportion (7.32%) earned less than ₹10,000.

Consumer perception towards the organic food product

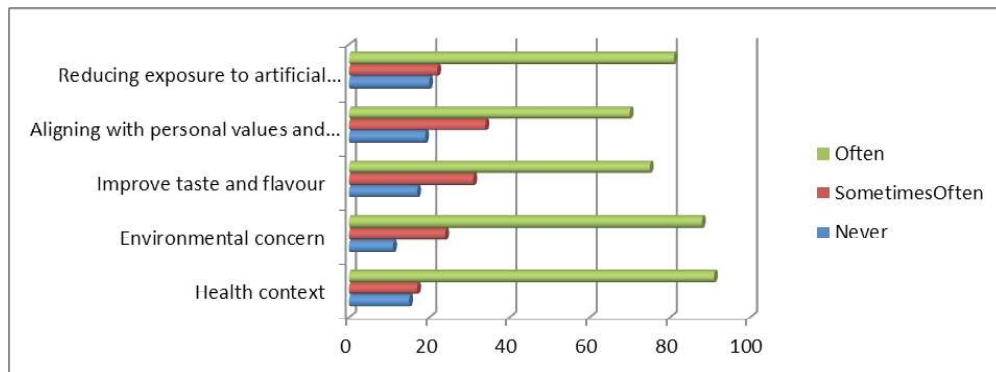
The rise of organic food products has transformed the way consumers approach their dietary choices. With growing concerns about health, wellness, and sustainability, individuals are increasingly seeking alternatives to conventional food options. Organic food products have emerged as a preferred choice, touted for their potential health benefits, environmental sustainability, and alignment with ethical consumption practices.

Table No.2
Consumer perception towards the organic food product

Sl. No.	Factors	Never	Sometimes	Often
1	Health context	15	17	91
2	Environmental concern	11	24	88
3	Improve taste and flavour	17	31	75
4	Aligning with personal values and lifestyle choices	19	34	70
5	Reducing exposure to artificial preservatives and additives	20	22	81

(Source: Primary Data)

Figure No.1
Consumer perception towards the organic food product



(Source: Primary Data)

Consumers exhibit a strong affinity for organic food products, primarily driven by health considerations, with 91% often prioritizing this factor. Environmental concerns also significantly influence purchasing decisions, as 88% of respondents frequently take this aspect into account. The desire to minimize exposure to artificial preservatives and additives is another crucial motivator, with 81% regularly opting for organic alternatives. Additionally, personal values and lifestyle choices align with organic product selection for 70% of respondents, while 75% consider improved taste and flavor when making purchasing decisions. These findings suggest that consumers are increasingly conscious of the health, environmental, and ethical implications of their food choices. As a result, marketers should emphasize the benefits of organic products in these areas to resonate with their target audience. Furthermore, highlighting the alignment of organic products with consumers' personal values and lifestyle choices can also prove effective.

Motivations for choosing organic products

The research examined the factors that drive the decision to choose organic products by employing the chi-square analysis method.

H0: Age groups do not significantly influence the reasons for choosing organic products.

Table: 3
Observed values

Age/ Reason for Choosing Organic Product	Health Benefits	Environmental Concerns	Supporting local farmers and communities	Quality of product	Food Safety	Total
20 - 25	9	2	1	3	3	18
25 – 35	7	3	3	8	3	24
35 – 45	17	10	5	5	6	43
Above 45	14	4	5	7	8	38
Total	47	19	14	23	20	123

(Source: Primary Data)

Table: 4
Expected values

Age/ Reason for Choosing Organic Product	Health Benefits	Environmental Concerns	Supporting local farmers and communities	Quality of product	Food Safety
20 - 25	6.88	2.78	2.05	3.36	2.92
25 – 35	9.17	3.70	2.73	4.49	3.90
35 – 45	16.43	6.64	4.89	8.04	6.99
Above 45	14.52	5.86	4.32	7.10	6.17
Chi-square value: 10.164					

(Source: Primary Data)

The calculated Chi-Square value (χ^2) is approximately 10.164. Given the p-value: approximately 0.59 (derived from $\chi^2 = 10.164$ and Degrees of Freedom (df) = 12) exceeds the typical significance threshold (0.05), so fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0). This outcome suggests no statistically significant relationship exists between age groups and reasons for choosing organic products. The observed frequencies align with chance, indicating age does not substantially influence organic product preferences. These findings imply that tailored marketing strategies for organic products across different age groups may not be necessary, as age does not significantly impact the reasons for choosing organic products.

Willingness to Pay Extra for Organic Products

H0: Educational qualification has no significant effect on willingness to pay extra for organic products.

Table: 5

Crosstab

		Willing to pay extra price for organic products					Total
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Educational Qualification	HSC	2	6	7	13	4	32
	Graduate	5	13	19	30	9	76
	Postgraduate	0	5	4	5	1	15
Total		7	24	30	48	14	123

(Source: Primary Data)

Table: 6

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.047	.087	-.514	.608 ^c
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	-.055	.089	-.605	.546 ^c
N of Valid Cases		123			

- a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.
- b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
- c. Based on normal approximation.

(Source: Primary Data)

Both Pearson's R (-0.047) and Spearman's correlation (-0.055) indicate a very weak negative correlation between educational qualifications and willingness to pay extra. The associated p-values (0.608 for Pearson and 0.546 for Spearman) are significantly higher than the conventional threshold of 0.05, which suggests that educational attainment does not substantially impact attitudes toward paying premium

prices for organic products. Organic product marketing strategies may not require tailoring to specific educational groups, as willingness to pay extra is not significantly influenced by educational qualification. Educational qualification does not significantly impact willingness to pay extra for organic products, suggesting a broader focus on environmental and health concerns may be more effective in marketing strategies.

Preference for Organic Products over non-organic products

H0: Educational qualification has no significant effect on preference for organic products over non-organic products

Table: 7

Crosstab

		Prefer organic products over non-organic products					Total
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Educational Qualification	HSC	6	7	6	12	1	32
	Graduate	13	10	19	21	13	76
	Postgraduate	2	5	6	2	0	15
Total		21	22	31	35	14	123

(Source: Primary Data)

Table: 8

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	-.023	.080	-.251	.802 ^c
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	-.024	.083	-.268	.789 ^c
N of Valid Cases		123			

- Not assuming the null hypothesis.
- Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
- Based on normal approximation.

(Source: Primary Data)

No statistically significant relationship exists between educational qualification and preference for organic products (p -values > 0.05). Educational attainment does not substantially impact attitudes toward organic products. Organic product marketing strategies may not require tailoring to specific educational groups, as preference for organic products is not significantly influenced by educational qualification. A weak, non-significant negative correlation suggests a slight trend toward decreased preference for organic products with increasing educational attainment.

Findings of the Study

This study reveals key insights into consumer preferences for organic food products. Health considerations (91%) and environmental concerns (88%) are primary drivers, followed by the desire to avoid artificial preservatives (81%) and alignment with personal values (70%). Notably, age does not significantly influence organic product preferences (p -value = 0.59). Additionally, educational qualification has no substantial impact on willingness to pay extra (Pearson's $R = -0.047$, p -value = 0.608) or preference for organic products (p -value > 0.05). These findings suggest that marketing strategies can focus on emphasizing health, environmental, and ethical benefits, rather than targeting specific age or educational groups. By highlighting these key drivers, marketers can effectively resonate with consumers and capitalize on the growing demand for organic food products.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into consumer preferences and attitudes toward organic food products. The findings underscore the significance of health, environmental, and ethical considerations in driving consumer demand. Notably, demographic factors such as age and educational qualification do not substantially influence organic product preferences or willingness to pay extra. These results suggest a universal appeal for organic products, driven by shared values and concerns. To capitalize on this trend, marketers should emphasize the health, environmental, and ethical benefits of organic products, while adopting a broad-based marketing approach that transcends demographic segmentation. By doing so, businesses can effectively tap

into the growing organic market and foster a sustainable and health-conscious consumer culture.

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