

PURCHASING PRACTICES FOR ORGANIC FOOD AMONG CONSUMERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: Organic food production has been increased in the recent years globally, and especially in developed countries. Organic food production undergoes rigorous rules and tests and natural way of produce and is therefore considered more nutritious, more natural and more sustainable, both for the environment and for consumers, than conventional food. The food and beverage industry plays a crucial role in people's lives because people buy food and beverages every day. Global food demand will increase in the future. To meet this demand, it is not enough to increase productivity in a sustainable way, but it is also necessary to change from linear mass consumption to a circular economy - which means in particular to change our norms, habits and routines. Consumer awareness of ethical issues have become extremely important recently, and with it the knowledge and awareness of ethical products. Increasing consumer concern increases the demand for "environmental aspects" of products, as well as increasing understanding of the consequences that certain products have on the environment. Interest in organically produced products is growing around the world for the matters of already established agricultural practices, safety, health issues, animal wellbeing issues and environmental concerns. Organic food processing and production in North Macedonia is not yet developed enough in scale and variety to enable the implementation of sustainable trends and actions on the market, on top of that the national market circumstances are quite small. In fact, organic food and products market is not sufficient for stimulation of production, and the development of the market is draw back by the lack of quantity and quality. Demands in the country are concentrated in larger cities and the supply chains that already exist are oriented towards export. Organic food share in the market in North Macedonia is small and is rarely mentioned in the statistical data published at the global and regional level, and is close or similar to neighbouring countries. The findings of this research will help marketers design better strategies for organic food producers to achieve greater success in the expanding and competitive organic product market and above all to inform consumers about the positive aspects of organic food consumption.

Keywords: Marketing, consumers, strategies, productivity

1. INTRODUCTION

To safeguard both human health and the environment, organic food is produced under tight rules and guidelines. Organic items are produced utilizing practices that do not compromise the environment, human health, or the natural balance. They are also grown on clean soil. Organic food production is legally governed and subject to ongoing inspections to ensure that no hazardous ingredients are present. They become more nourishing and healthier as a result. The goal of organic farming is to utilize as little or no synthetic chemical inputs as possible, including additives, pesticides, fertilizers, and pharmaceuticals.

This research conducted is significant because it explores the issue of whether consumers are aware that organic food incorporates sustainability as a fundamental component of its business plan and focuses on sustainable consumption in general. More details regarding the advantages of eating organic food can persuade customers to make decisions about what to buy more readily.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research methodology is a periodic way of accumulating data and analysing them based on the purpose of the research. Research methodology consists of a list of frameworks, methods and instruments necessary for data collection and analysis. Explanation of the causal relationship between the variables – where attitudes, consumer behavior, and perceived behavioral control over behavioral goals are evaluated – is the primary goal of the research. The research began with the phase of creating a survey questionnaire for organic food products, and ended with online testing of theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991 as cited by Peterson, 2023).

According to Dihr et al. (2021) customer knowledge can be divided into three categories: prior experience, objective knowledge, and subjective knowledge, or what the customer believes to be knowledgeable. Since previous research has shown that subjective knowledge has a stronger influence on purchase behaviour than objective knowledge

(Pucci et al., 2019; Aertsens et al., 2011), only subjective knowledge is included in this research. Subjective knowledge about organic food was measured by the question "Do you know what organic food is?", with a specific definition as the next statement to support the previous answer.

3. RESULTS

Around 2000, organic practices were introduced in Macedonia (now North Macedonia). A project funded by Swiss Cooperation and FiBL, a research institute with branches in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, led to the first organic inspections in 2003 and the first organic certificates in 2004. In 2019, 8.1% of the country's GDP, 10.4% of all trade, and 14% of all employment were derived from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. EU (49.7% of total exports) and CEFTA nations (36.1%) are the top markets for agricultural and food products (Willer, 2020). Even though 49% of North Macedonia's land is used for agriculture, organic farming is still in its infancy (Hadzi Naumova-Mihajlovska et al., 2022). When it comes to financial support and initiatives to advance the growth of organic agricultural output, North Macedonia leads the region.

Table 1: Indicators of development of individual markets of Western Balkans and Europe (EU), 2016.

Countries / EU	Retail value (million €)	Per-capita consumption (€)	Share of organic food (%)	Sales growth rate (%)	Exports (million €)
B&H	0.4	0.1	-	-	2
Croatia	99 (2014)	24 (2014)	2.2 (2014)	20.3 (2010-11)	3 (2011)
Montenegro	0.1	0.2	-	-	-
Serbia	35 (2012)	4.4 (2012)	-	-	19
Slovenia	49 (2013)	27 (2013)	1.8 (2013)	10 (2012-13)	0
EU	30,682	60	-	12.0	-
Europe	33,526	40	-	11.4	-

Source: Willer, 2020

Table 2: Organic food buying frequency in the Western Balkans countries, including France, in (%)

Country	Once daily	Once weekly	Once per month	Rarely or never
Serbia	24.1	25.4	12.3	37.3
Macedonia	26.5	19.7	8.7	44.8
Montenegro	36.9	28	14	19.5
B&H	44	34.3	10.2	10.9
Croatia	31.1	26.4	12.2	27.7
Slovenia	32.9	33.4	15.5	16.7
France (2014)	10	27	28	34

Source: Blagica Sekovska et al., 2013

Given that organic food is still a relatively new product, it is important to comprehend the various driving forces, contributing variables, and customer attitudes and opinions about this kind of product and its use. While a considerable portion of the Macedonian market lacks the ability to identify the national label of organic products, only a small percentage of consumers in the country are aware of the accurate definition of organic food (Vesna Brčić-Stipčević & Petljak, 2011; Vehapi & Dolićanin, 2016a). Purchasing organic food is negatively impacted by the general lack of understanding and awareness regarding organic farming and its products.

4. DISCUSSIONS

These figures clearly show that the North Macedonian market for organic food is not keeping up with the markets of developed nations and EU member states that are its neighbors. The primary causes are low levels of consumption, poor consumer understanding and access to information, inconsistent product offerings, a lack of product variety, inadequately established distribution networks, and a low average income. (Slobodan Nešković, 2022; Vlahović et al., n.d.).

We must also not overlook and forget the fact that without a drastic reduction in carbon emissions - the main cause of global warming - the prospect of some of the most common foodstuffs being freely available to everyone may become a thing of the past, and consumers could feel the harsh impacts of climate change not only around them, but also in their supermarkets where the availability or price of agricultural products will be affected (Lee, 2009).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Prior studies have shown that consumers purchase organic food items primarily for their own benefit, namely for taste and health (Guiné et al., 2020; Hjelmar, 2011). However, considerations for animal welfare and the environment are also factors in the decision to purchase these goods (Hill & Lynchehaun, 2002; Padel & Foster, 2005). (Guiné et al., 2020; Padel & Foster, 2005).

A survey among consumers of organic products in North Macedonia and Serbia, and the findings indicated that most respondents (72% of Macedonian and 58% of Serbian consumers) thought that organic products were more natural and healthier than conventional food products (30% of Macedonian and 49% of Serbian consumers), and that they did not pollute the environment (35.5% of Macedonian and 40% of Serbian consumers) (Blagica Sekovska et al., 2013).

In this study, the influence of subjective (social) norm on the intention to purchase organic food is not significant, in contrast to many other studies (Naidoo & Henry Ramatsetse, 2016; Lokman DİNC & HUANG, 2023) that found a significant positive influence of subjective norm on the intention to purchase organic food products. The study's findings support the conclusion that consumers' intentions to purchase organic food are not significantly influenced by the opinions of close friends and family members or by their purchasing habits.

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