CONSUMER BEHAVIOR OF ORGANIC FOOD CONSUMERS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: Customers, as well as companies that cater to the requirements and desires of their competitors, need to take into account consumer behavior and/or purchasing behavior. If consumers wish to manage and arrange their finances as they see fit, they must take responsibility for their own spending habits. Rush spending should be discouraged at all costs since it may quickly plunge a person into financial ruin. Businesses that observe consumer behavior will be able to determine how to design, manufacture, and promote items in a way that best suits the tastes and preferences of their target market. Conversely, consumers should monitor their purchasing patterns to determine how frugal they are with their money or, if necessary, make the necessary adjustments in order to prevent spending it on items they like but don't actually need.
Numerous studies come to the conclusion that effective market direction and development, as well as the negotiation of market opportunities, depend heavily on a deeper understanding of consumer perception of healthy food and its determinants. However, it is also critical to recognize that positive attributes are trust goods, meaning that consumers cannot independently verify them. Consequently, the degree and caliber of information that consumers possess and receive from the market greatly influences their decision-making process.
Giving consumers information about the safety or quality of their food can have a big welfare impact. Knowing how consumers look for and get information has long been regarded as essential to improving marketing decisions since information is most likely to be efficient and effective when it meets the specific demands of the target audience. The primary goal of the current paper is to examine the factors influencing consumer behavior toward organic and functional food products and to confirm the potential for further growth of these segments based on prior observations and research papers. This will enable the development of relevant consumer communication strategies based on market segmentation. The purpose of this study is to find out if consumers are aware that organic food incorporates sustainability as a fundamental component and focuses on sustainable consumption in general.
Keywords: Consumer behaviour, factors, strategies, market.

1. INTRODUCTION

Examining the factors that impact consumer behavior, purchase intention, and decisions regarding the responsible consumption of organic food, as well as the factors that influence consumer buying behavior (Zhang et al., 2022), is the main problem of this research paper. This is being done while also raising public awareness of sustainable food choices in the Republic of North Macedonia, especially in the cities of Skopje and Kumanovo.
Not only does organic farming have enormous economic possibilities for growers, but also for businesses. The superior nutritional qualities of organic food and numerous additional advantages account for a large portion of the advantages. The country's geographic location, which offers suitable climate conditions, and the quality of the soil are further advantages. Thus, North Macedonia's economy can be generally improved, allowing for higher growth and development, and it would greatly enhance the quality of life for the population who are conscious of their health and desire a better life.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to gather data for the study, a survey questionnaire was made consisting of the following categories of questions: respondents' sociodemographic details; their purchase habits for organic food; their subjective knowledge; and the theories of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991).
The first part of the questionnaire included close-ended questions related to sociodemographic characteristics: age, gender, place of residence, education, employment status, income status and number of household members.
The main survey was conducted from 28 August to 07 October 2022 in the cities of Kumanovo and Skopje. It was conducted online, via e-mail and Facebook, using the questionnaire as the most appropriate method for collecting large sample of primary data for the descriptive survey.
This is a quantitative study in which data analysis consisted of descriptive and inferential statistics, using linear and multiple regression analysis. The main findings of the study showed that factors such as perceived behavioural

control and purchasing attitude in terms of health consciousness significantly influence the consumers' intention to purchase organic food (Peterson, 2023).

3. RESULTS

The results of the study supported the validity of Hypotheses H1 and H2, which were predicated on the idea that buying organic food would significantly and favorably affect one's health and environmental consciousness. It is consistent with earlier studies on the buying habits of consumers of organic foods. In particular, the findings of a study carried out in Switzerland (Hansmann et al., 2020) indicate that participants place a greater value on a healthy diet than on an environmentally conscious diet, and that respondents with a more positive attitude toward purchasing organic food intend to buy the same products more frequently. To ensure neutrality, the research is grounded in facts and observations. In the study, information was gathered from 108 participants in the towns of Kumanovo and Skopje. Four responses were discarded because they were inconsistent, and an analysis was conducted using several methods.

The results confirm the H4, as well. The more customers believe they have control over their purchase, it may be inferred that they will buy organic food more frequently. This is because they understand that factors like availability or price do not affect their decision to buy organic food (Jiang et al., 2023).

Validity and Reliability of the Constructs

The coefficient Cronbach's Alpha value in the reliability test for Subjective norms was less than 0.65.

Table 1: Coefficient Cronbach's Alpha values

Variables	Coefficient Cronbach's α	
	Items	n=104
Health consciousness (HC)	3	0.938
Environment protection (EP)	2	0.916
Subjective norms (SN)	3	0.402
Perceived behavioural control (PBC)	3	0.868
Intention (INT)	3	0.856
Total	**14**	**0.940**

Source: Author

According to literature, the Corrected item-total correlation should be >0.3 (Nelson, 2023). Items 2 and 3 for the Subjective norms *in the Item-total statistics table* do not correlate well with the scale overall. In order to obtain reliable values for further analysis and testing of the hypotheses item 3 was dropped.

Statistics for Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 29. The validity of indicators in each variable was tested by factor analysis Pearson correlation in order to be further assessed. The validity of the questions is highly significant if the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) for the sample size of 104 (N=104) at a degree of freedom (DF=N-2=102) is equal or greater than $r \geq 0.195$ *(*Dr. Alok Gupta, 2023*).*

Cronbach's Alpha *(α)* reliability model was used to check the level of reliability of variable items where the Cronbach's Alpha score is above 0.65 ($0.65<\alpha<1$) (Pallant, 2020).

The statistical techniques for data analysis and interpretation involved descriptive and inferential statistics.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The research results have shown the interrelation of consumer attitudes (health consciousness and environment protection), subjective norms and perceived behavioural control and the impact on purchase buying intention. The linear and multiple regression analyses were conducted for the testing of hypotheses. The next tables show the analysis findings.

Table 2: Linear regression analysis

Factor	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	N
Health consciousness	3.753	1.354	104
Environmental protection	3.769	1.360	104
Subjective norms	3.178	0.830	104
Perceived behavioural control	3.756	1.253	104

Source: Author

The mean value of all statements measuring the attitude towards purchase of organic food in terms of health consciousness is 3.753 with Standard deviation (SD = 1.354). Therefore, it can be said that the respondents have a positive attitude about buying organic food in terms of health consciousness. The respondents have the highest degree of agreement with the statement "Organic products are healthier than other alternatives." ($\bar{x}$ = 3.846), and the lowest level of agreement is with the statement "Healthy diet is particularly important to me." ($\bar{x}$ = 3.587) (Table 3).

Table 3: Attitude towards purchase of organic food in terms of health consciousness

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Healthy diet is particularly important to me.	3.587	1.4046	104
Organic products contain less chemicals/pesticides than other alternatives.	3.827	1.4444	104
Organic products are healthier than other alternatives.	3.846	1.4533	104

Source: Author

The mean value of all statements measuring the attitude in terms of environment protection is 3.769 (SD = 1.360). The respondents have a positive attitude about buying organic food in terms of environment protection, the highest degree of agreement with the statement "Organic production is more environmental-friendly than other alternatives." ($\bar{x}$ = 3.865) (Table 4).

Table 4: Attitude towards purchase of organic food in terms of environment protection

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Environmentally conscious diet is particularly important to me.	3.673	1.4444	104
Organic production is more environmental-friendly than other alternatives.	3.865	1.3869	104

Source: Author

The mean value of the statements measuring the subjective norms of buying organic food is 3.178 (SD = 0.830). The highest degree of agreement among respondents is with the statement "My family thinks I should buy organic food too." ($\bar{x}$ = 3.433) (Table 5).

Table 5: Subjective norms of buying organic food

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
My family thinks I should buy organic food too.	3.433	1.2677	104
People around me buy more organic products.	2.923	0.8208	104

Source: Author

The mean value of the statements measuring perceived behavioural control over the purchase of organic food is 3.756 (SD = 1.253). The highest level of agreement was found for the statement "I expect to be able to buy organic food." ($\bar{x}$ = 3.837) (Table 6).

Table 6: Perceived behavioural control over the purchase of organic food

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
It depends only on me whether I will buy organic food.	3.731	1.3670	104
I believe I could buy organic food if I wanted to.	3.702	1.4540	104
I expect to be able to buy organic food.	3.837	1.4012	104

Source: Author

Table 7: Multiple regression analysis

R^2=0.78, AR^2=0.77, F=88.229, p<0.001

Note: B – Non-standardised coefficient; S.E. – Standard error; β – Standardised coefficient; t – t-Ratios; Sig. – Significant level (p); Tolerance – Collinearity tolerance; VIF – Variance inflation factor; R^2 – R Square; AR^2 – Adjusted R Square; F – F Change.

Factor	Organic food purchase intention (N=104)						
	B	S.E.	β	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	0.347	0.220	-	1.577	0.118	-	-
Health consciousness	0.293	0.090	0.361	3.277	0.001	0.182	5.493
Environment protection	0.073	0.087	0.090	0.839	0.404	0.190	5.259
Subjective norms	0.229	0.071	0.173	3.234	0.002	0.774	1.291
Perceived behavioural control	0.331	0.081	0.378	4.090	<0.001	0.259	3.856

Source: Author

Significant predictors of intention to buy organic food are attitude about purchasing organic food in terms of health consciousness, and perceived behavioural control, while subjective norms and environmental protection have small or no significant influence on purchase intention (Kumar, 2022). The influence of perceived behavioural control shown with the standardised beta coefficient (β=0.378, p<0.001) is stronger than the influence of attitude for purchase in terms of health consciousness (β=0.361, p=0.001).

Variance inflation factor and Collinearity tolerance were used to identify any multicollinearity problem. The higher the VIF, the higher the possibility that multicollinearity exists, and further research is required. Hair *et al.* (2019) recommend that a very small tolerance value (0.10 or below) or a large VIF value (10 or above) indicate high collinearity. VIF values in this research were ranging from 1.291-5.493 and the tolerance range was between 0.182-0.774, so the multicollinearity was not a problem for this research.

Perceived behavioral control has the biggest impact on purchase intention, followed by purchasing attitude in terms of health consciousness (Branscum & Qualls Fay, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that consumers believe that purchasing organic food is solely within their power, and that this assumption may have a good or negative impact on the intensity of their organic food purchases. Another finding is that the perceived importance and usefulness of purchasing organic food – that is, the perceived degree of intelligence and quality associated with doing so – is what drives customers' decisions to purchase organic food.

Customers who feel more in control of their purchases of organic food also plan to make larger purchases more frequently. Consequently, the goal of advertising campaigns should be to increase consumers' perception of control over their purchase of organic food. Eventually, this would result in even greater plans to purchase organic products.

The purchase intention of consumers towards organic food was examined with this research in the cities of Kumanovo and Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia. Model analysis showed that perceived behavioral control and attitude toward organic food purchase had a significant impact on behavioral intention (organic food purchase). The impact of environmental protection and subjective norms is not significant.

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