

Psychological Differences between Non-to-Occasional and Regular Organic Food Consumers in an Emerging Market: A Preliminary Comparative Analysis among Malaysian Adults

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing global interest in healthy and sustainable food choices, with organic food gaining popularity due to its perceived benefits for human health and the environment. However, organic food consumption remains uncommon among consumers in developing countries. This study aims to understand the reasons behind this by examining the differences in psychological factors and intention to consume between non-to-occasional and organic food consumers in the context of Malaysian adults. A total of 119 usable responses were collected through online sampling, employing a Google Form questionnaire embedded in a Facebook advertisement targeting respondents who meet the study's inclusion criteria. The analysis revealed significant differences in psychological factors and intention between non-to-occasional and regular organic food consumers. Regular organic food consumers exhibited a more positive attitude, higher subjective norm, stronger perceived behavioural control, higher trust in organic food labelling and certification, and a greater inclination to consume organic food compared to consumers who had never or occasionally purchased organic food. This preliminary study's findings hold valuable insights for policymakers, relevant stakeholders, and industry players aiding them in formulating effective strategies to encourage safer and more environmentally-friendly dietary choices, focusing on the influence of psychological factors.

Keywords: Actual Consumption, Malaysian Adults, Organic Food, Psychological Factors, Sustainable Food Consumption

Introduction

The demand for organic food is steadily rising globally, including in Malaysia (Saleki et al., 2019), as well as in other developing countries like Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2019) and Thailand

(Maichum et al., 2017). This surge is driven by growing consumer concerns about food safety, health, and the environment. Technically, a product labelled "organic" indicates to consumers that it is grown using a production method that differs from conventional practices, making it a "process claim" rather than a product claim. According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), organic agriculture is defined as follows:

"A production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems, and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity, and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and good quality of life for all involved."

(IFOAM-Organics International, 2017)

One of the major highlights of organic food that interests people is its avoidance of synthetic agricultural inputs such as pesticides, fertilizers, and hormones (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2010). Despite strong awareness and intention to consume organic food, actual consumption remains relatively low. For instance, in a survey of 9,470 households in Germany, 20.0% of respondents exhibited a highly positive attitude towards purchasing organic food, but only 3.0% of households spent more than one-fifth of their food budget on organic items (Janssen, 2018). A lower trend is expected in developing countries where organic food consumption is still in its growing stage (Iqbal et al., 2021; Singh & Verma, 2017) and it is predominantly consumed by a certain group of people, such as urban residents and higher-income earners (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, psychological factors have been identified as the most influential factors shaping consumers' interest in organic food, as they perceive it to be safer, healthier, and more environmentally friendly (Ngo et al., 2021; Song & Liew, 2019; Voon et al., 2011). Conversely, negative perceptions of the high price and limited availability of organic food (Wang et al., 2020), as well as mistrust in organic food certification and labelling, deter consumers from choosing organic options for their daily food intake (Tandon et al., 2020). The influence of psychological factors on consumer behaviour toward organic food consumption has been successfully studied using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Qi & Ploeger, 2021; Wong & Aini, 2017). The TPB is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) that comprises three main constructs predicting behavioural intentions: personal attitude towards the behaviour, perceived social pressure (subjective norms), and perceived control over ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

However, many past studies have primarily focused on the intention to consume organic food rather than actual consumption (Canova et al., 2020; Chekima et al., 2019; Jaafar et al., 2020). Therefore, this preliminary study aims to investigate the actual consumption of organic food among Malaysians and explore the differences in psychological factors and intentions to consume between non-to-occasional and regular organic food consumers, guided by the TPB. The insights gained are believed to be valuable for informing policymakers and relevant stakeholders in designing effecting strategies focusing on psychological factors to enhance organic food consumption among regular consumers, as well as interventions to encourage a shift for non-to-occasional consumers. These efforts align with the national sustainable development goals (SDGs) aimed at promoting responsible consumption and production in the country.

Methodology

This preliminary study utilized a cross-sectional survey design, and respondents were recruited through online sampling via a designated Facebook advertisement. Interested participants who clicked on the advertisement were directed to a Google Forms questionnaire, which consisted of items measuring sociodemographic characteristics, psychological factors, intention, and actual consumption of organic food, based on a questionnaire previously established for reliability and validity by (Jaafar et al., 2023). Targeted sampling was employed due to the relatively low prevalence of organic food consumption in Malaysia, which is practiced by only a small percentage of the population (Suhaimi et al., 2016). The survey ensured anonymity and confidentiality for all participants, following a method similar to a study conducted by Shaver et al (2019) to achieve purposive sampling and obtain a more representative sample for a cross-sectional health survey.

Additionally, the advertisement specifically targeted Malaysian Facebook users who are at least 18 years old and have either heard about organic food or expressed an interest in searching for organic food. Respondents were further vetted through inclusion and exclusion criteria questions in the Google form. Criteria included being a Malaysian citizen residing in any state of Malaysia and being able to communicate in either Malay or English. Respondents were also required to have the autonomy to make their food consumption decisions based on personal needs, preferences, and beliefs. Only those who met all the inclusion requirements were permitted to complete all sections of the questionnaire, while others were routed to the survey's end and subsequently excluded from the data.

The sample size for this preliminary study was determined by considering an anticipated effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.5$, a desired statistical power level of 0.8, and a significance level (alpha) of 0.05 for independent t-test analysis. This calculation was performed using the online calculator available on www.danielsoper.com. Based on these parameters, the calculated minimum total sample size required was 102 participants. Ultimately, we included 119 usable samples for further analysis, with 50 respondents in the organic consumer group and 69 respondents in the non-organic consumer group.

Descriptive analysis, including frequency, percentage, and mean scores, was used in this study. The differences in psychological factors and intention to consume between non-to-occasional and organic food consumers were determined using an independent t-test. These analyses were conducted using The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 20.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, 2011). Statistical significance was confirmed if the p-value was less 0.05. The survey was conducted in August 2020.

Results and Findings

Table 1 provides an overview of the background of the respondents. Among the total respondents, approximately 79.8% are female. The majority of participants fall into the younger adult category, aged between 18 to 29 years old (40.3%), followed by older adults (40 years old and above) (34.5%) and middle-aged individuals (30-39 years old) (25.2%). The sample is predominantly Malay (52.9%), followed by Chinese (39.5%), Indian (5.9%), and Other ethnicities (1.7%). Most of the sampled respondents reside in the central region of Malaysia (73.9%), followed by the South (15.1%), North (5.0%), and East coast (4.2%). Meanwhile, Sabah and Sarawak were each represented by a single respondent in the study.

Regarding educational achievement, a significant proportion of the respondents (89.1%) have received tertiary level education. In terms of income, nearly three-quarters of

the participants (61.3%) earn RM 1,500 and above monthly. Furthermore, approximately 52.1% of the respondents are single. It is noteworthy that the majority of participants reported good health status, with around 89.9% claiming no presence of chronic diseases and a healthy body mass index (BMI) falling between 18 and 24.9 kg/m² (52.9%).

Table 1
Background of respondents

Factors	n (%)
Gender	
Male	24 (20.2)
Female	95 (79.8)
Age, years old	
18-29	48 (40.3)
30-39	30 (25.2)
40 and above	41 (34.5)
Ethnicity/ Ethnicity	
Bumiputera	63 (52.9)
Chinese	47 (39.5)
India	7 (5.9)
Others	2 (1.7)
Living area	
Central zone	88 (73.9)
South	18 (15.1)
North	6 (5.0)
East coast	5 (4.2)
Sabah	1 (0.8)
Sarawak	1 (0.8)
Education	
Secondary	13 (10.9)
Tertiary	106 (89.1)
Income	
< RM 1,500	46 (38.7)
RM 1,500 and above	73 (61.3)
Marital status	
Single	62 (52.1)
Married	57 (47.9)
Presence of chronic disease	
Yes	12 (10.1)
No	107 (89.9)
BMI, kg/m ²	
< 18.5	11 (9.2)
18.5 - 24.9	63 (52.9)
25 - 29.9	25 (21.0)
≥ 30	20 (16.8)

Malaysian adult's actual consumption of organic food

Table 2 displays the overall mean score of actual consumption of organic food among Malaysian adults. The mean score was categorized into low (mean score between 1.00-3.00) and high (mean score between 3.01-5.00) levels. The resulting mean score of 3.01 ± 0.99 indicates that a majority of the respondents had a slightly high level of actual consumption of organic food. The analysis confirmed that only 42.0% of the respondents exhibited a high level of actual consumption of organic food, while the majority had low consumption (58.0%). The group with low actual consumption was referred to as non-to-occasional organic food consumers, as they reported never buying organic food or purchasing it only once or twice a month. On the other hand, regular consumers were those who reported buying organic food "often" (once a week) or "always" (more than once a week) from 12 different organic food groups within a year.

Table 2

Mean score of actual consumption of organic food

Level	Frequency	Percentage	Mean score \pm S.D.
Low (Non-to-occasional organic food consumers)	69	58.0	3.01 ± 0.99
High (Regular organic food consumers)	50	42.0	

Table 3 illustrates the mean scores of actual consumptions for each organic food group among Malaysian adults. Notably, organic fruits or vegetables ($M = 3.57$, $S.D. = 1.07$) were found to be the most regularly consumed organic food, followed by organic rice, grains, or dried goods ($M = 3.24$, $S.D. = 1.17$), organic dairy & beverages ($M = 3.18$, $S.D. = 1.23$), and organic chicken or meat products ($M = 3.15$, $S.D. = 1.19$). Conversely, the three least purchased products were organic cereals ($M = 2.81$, $S.D. = 1.29$), organic biscuits or snacks ($M = 2.81$, $S.D. = 1.26$), and other organic products ($M = 2.75$, $S.D. = 1.24$). These findings suggest that organic food consumption among Malaysian adults is more prevalent for fresh whole produce and minimally processed food, rather than highly processed food with multiple ingredients.

Table 3

Mean score of actual consumption of organic food for each organic food group

Organic food groups	Mean score ± S.D.
1. Organic fruits or vegetables	3.57 ± 1.07
2. Organic dairy & beverages (e.g., juice, milk, soy, oat, tea, coffee, puree or cordial)	3.18 ± 1.23
3. Organic chicken or meat products	3.15 ± 1.19
4. Organic rice, grains or dried goods (e.g., dried almond, cashew nuts, quinoa or chia seeds)	3.24 ± 1.17
5. Organic noodles or pasta	2.96 ± 1.22
6. Organic sauces, condiments or oil (e.g., soy sauce, apple cider coconut oil or olive oil)	2.84 ± 1.22
7. Organic herbs or spices (e.g., chilli flakes, black pepper or cinnamon powder)	2.99 ± 1.30
8. Organic cereal	2.81 ± 1.29
9. Organic biscuits or snacks	2.81 ± 1.26
10. Organic spreads or honey	2.95 ± 1.30
11. Organic sugar or salt	2.92 ± 1.30
12. Other organic product(s)	2.75 ± 1.24

Differences in Psychological Factors and Intention to Consume between Non-to-Occasional and Regular Organic Food Consumers

Based on the mean scores tabulated in Table 4, non-to-occasional organic food consumers ($M = 4.14$, $S.D. = 0.47$) exhibited significantly lower positive attitudes towards organic food compared to regular organic food consumers ($M = 4.38$, $S.D. = 0.39$; $t(117) = -2.94$, $p = 0.004$). This suggests that non-to-occasional consumers have less favourable perceptions towards organic food, which may affect their consumption behaviour. Previous studies have also found that consumers' attitudes towards organic food play a positive role in organic consumption (Chekima et al., 2019; Tran & Nguyen, 2021).

Regarding the subjective norm, a significant difference was found between non-to-occasional organic food consumers ($M = 3.21$, $S.D. = 0.72$) and regular organic food consumers ($M = 3.99$, $S.D. = 0.63$; $t(117) = -6.07$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that regular organic food consumers experience greater social pressure or influence compared to non-to-occasional consumers. Regular organic food consumers are likely to have a stronger network or social support system that actively promotes organic food consumption. They may participate in social groups, organizations, or online communities where organic food is highly valued and encouraged, reinforcing their commitment to regular organic food consumption (Ruiz De Maya et al., 2011). Furthermore, the influence of social pressure on sustainable and safe food consumption is amplified during global health crises like Covid-19 (Latip et al., 2021).

The independent t-test revealed a significant difference between non-to-occasional organic food consumers ($M = 3.53$, $S.D. = 0.67$) and regular organic food consumers ($M = 4.14$, $S.D. = 0.54$; $t(117) = -5.27$, $p = 0.000$) in terms of perceived behavioural control. This finding suggests that regular organic food consumers have better control over their capabilities and resources to consume organic food. It aligns with previous research that highlights the importance of access to organic food, including availability and affordability, in encouraging

consumers to shift towards more sustainable food consumption practices (Singh & Verma, 2017; von Meyer-Höfer et al., 2015).

Table 4 also indicates that regular organic food consumers exhibited significantly higher mean scores of trust in organic food labelling and certification ($M = 4.02$, $S.D. = 0.73$) compared to non-to-occasional organic food consumers ($M = 3.57$, $S.D. = 0.70$; $t(117) = -3.41$, $p = 0.000$). This finding underscores the importance of reliable organic food certification and labelling in shaping people's confidence in organic food, aligning with previous studies that have examined the role of trust in organic food labelling and certification (Canova et al., 2020; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). Moreover, since organic food is considered a credence good, consumers rely on third-party certification, and organic logos serve as instruments to gain consumer trust (Janssen & Hamm, 2012).

This study's results confirm that regular organic food consumers have a significantly higher intention to consume organic food ($M = 4.29$, $S.D. = 0.57$) compared to non-to-occasional organic food consumers ($M = 3.87$, $S.D. = 0.66$; $t(117) = -3.86$, $p = 0.000$). This finding aligns with previous research, indicating that individuals who prefer organic food tend to exhibit a more positive attitude towards it, positively influencing their intention to engage in organic food consumption (Tan et al., 2022). On the other hand, the lower intention to consume organic food among non-to-occasional organic food consumers could be attributed to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For instance, some individuals may hold a strong preference for the taste or sensory appeal of conventional food, which they are more familiar with, leading them to be less inclined to consume organic food despite being aware of its benefits. Additionally, the limited accessibility of organic food in certain areas might also discourage non-to-occasional organic food consumers from incorporating organic options into their diet (Lim et al., 2014; Tandon et al., 2021).

Table 4

Differences in Psychological Factors and Intention to Consume between Non-to-Occasional and Regular Organic Food Consumers

Factors	Mean score \pm S.D.		t-value	p-value
	Non-to-occasional organic consumer	Regular organic food consumer		
Attitude	4.14 \pm 0.47	4.38 \pm 0.39	-2.94	0.004
Subjective norm	3.21 \pm 0.72	3.99 \pm 0.63	-6.07	0.000
Perceived behavioural control	3.53 \pm 0.67	4.14 \pm 0.54	-5.27	0.000
Trust in organic food labelling and certification	3.57 \pm 0.70	4.02 \pm 0.73	-3.41	0.000
Intention consumption	3.87 \pm 0.66	4.29 \pm 0.57	-3.86	0.000

Recommendation and Conclusion

In conclusion, this preliminary study highlights the differences in psychological factors and intention to consume organic food between non-to-occasional and organic food consumers among Malaysian adults. Despite there being more non-to-occasional organic food consumers, the study establishes that those who exhibit more positive attitudes towards food safety, health, and the environment, higher subjective norm, stronger perceived behavioural

control, higher trust in organic food labelling, and greater consumption intention tend to be regular organic food consumers.

Additionally, the study reveals valuable information about the preference for fresh and whole organic food categories compared to processed ones. Nevertheless, due to its preliminary nature, future research with a larger and more diverse sample is recommended to strengthen the study's generalizability. Understanding the psychological drivers of organic food consumption provides empirical evidence that can guide policymakers, relevant stakeholders, and industry players in formulating effective strategies to encourage sustainable practices, benefiting both consumers and the organic food industry in the developing nation.

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