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Assessing the Young Consumers' Motives and Purchase Behavior for Organic Food: An Empirical Evidence from a Developing Nation

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Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate the young consumers' motives to purchase organic food in a developing nation (Malaysia). Four key motives of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern are examined in this study. Consumers' purchase behaviour is represented by purchase intentions and actual purchase. The questionnaires used was administered to a convenience sample of 398 young consumers from Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, through a self-administered questionnaire. Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling and five hypotheses were tested. The findings reported that food safety concern, health consciousness, and environment concern have significantly influenced purchase intentions of organic food. Purchase intentions is positively correlated to the actual purchase of organic food. There was no significant effect of affordability on purchase intentions. Based on the findings, strategies to enhance the quality, long-term health benefits, environment friendliness, and reduce in pricing of organic food should be undertaken.

Keywords: Organic Food, Purchase Intention, Food Safety, Health Consciousness

Introduction

The market of organic food has achieved remarkable growth over the last few decades. The global sales for organic food have reached US\$89.7 billion in 2016 (Australian Organic LTD 2018). Organic food industry in most developing countries is slowly moving from the niche market to high potential growth industry. For example, in Malaysia, the organic packaged food, which is one of the category from the organic food industry, recorded 4% current value growth to reach sales of RM10 million in 2017 (Euromonitor 2018). In Vietnam, organic food sales have achieved 1.7 million euros annually (Vietnam Economic News 2018). The growth of organic food industry is linked to the increasing

demand by consumers on the products. Among the reasons for increasing demand of organic food products are food safety concern (Hsu, Chang and Lin 2016; Harper and Makatouni 2002), health consciousness (Lillywhite, Al-Oun, and Simonsen 2013), and environment concern (Nandi, Bokelmann, Gowdru and Dias 2016). In the last decades, there has been a progressive increase in environmental consciousness of consumers, and the concern about the environment moved from a fringe to a mainstream issue. Ethical consumers have emerged and their main concerns are buying products that is not harmful to environment and society, as well as strong emphasize on nutritional value, health and quality of food (Wier and Calverley 2002). Consumers have become dissatisfied with conventional food products that are produced by adopting intensive agriculture (Gil, Gracia, and Sanchez 2000). As a result, the popularity of organic produce increases as it adopted environmental friendly method of production such as free from chemical fertilizers, artificial pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones, irradiation, food additives, and genetic modification.

Despite various benefits of organic food, there are some concerns raised such as the high pricing that affect the affordability to purchase the products. In a developing country like Malaysia where economy is growing steadily, the majority population comprises of the middle class category (Malaysia Economic Monitor 2018). It was found that the price of organic food in Malaysia is much more expensive than conventional food, with substantial price differences by as much as 100% to 300%. Hence, affordability issues leads to barrier for consumers to purchase organic food (Song, Safari and Mansori 2017). A few studies (i.e., Xie Wang, Yang, Wang and Zhang 2015; Tsakiridou, Boutsouki, Zotos and Mattas 2007) have reported that young consumers are not willing to pay for organic food products due to their lower-financial status or lower purchasing power. Young generation are the future of our society and country, which their characteristics are different compared to other generations (Kanchanapibul, Lacka, Wang, and Chan 2014). However, it was found that the findings by Xie et al. (2015) contradicts with other authors. For example, Pugliese, Zanasi, Atallah and Cosimo (2013) reported that the younger and wealthier individuals are more interested on organic food compare to others in the developing countries context. The younger consumers show more interest and positive attitudes towards organic food (Magnusson, Arvola, Hursti, Aberg and Sjoden 2003). Further to that, this group of consumers seem well educated about environmental issues and sustainability (Furlow and Knott 2009).

Past literature on organic food have generated extensive insights into motives of consumers' purchase behaviour of organic food products. However, little attempt of past research studies that have investigated young consumers' purchasing behavior of organic food (Thambiah, Khin, Muthaiyah and Yuen 2015), and in particular, in the context of a developing country such as Malaysia. Thambiah et al. (2015) have conducted a study on the motives of young Malaysian consumers' intention to consume organic food, but their investigation was limited to environmental concern, price consciousness, quality and familiarity towards intention to consume the products. See and Mansori (2012) have confined their investigation on young female consumers' motivations for purchase of organic food in Malaysia. Hence, this study is expected to address the research gap.

Research Objective

This exploratory study is aimed to investigate four key motives of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern factors in influencing young consumers' purchase intentions and actual purchase of organic food in the context of a developing country, Malaysia. Thus, the primary objectives of this study are; 1) to investigate the effect of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environmental concern on young consumers' purchase intentions of organic food and 2) to analyse the influence of young consumers' purchase intentions towards actual purchase of organic food.

In this study, young consumers are conceptualised to include consumers aged 24 and under (Chan and Zhang 2007). This study will apply the Hierarchy of Effect Model (HEM) to investigate the cognitive (consumers' motivation factors of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern), affective (purchase intentions), and conative (actual purchase). Hence, the investigation is expected to contribute to the development and validation of HEM in the context of consumer purchasing behaviour of organic food industry. The findings of this research will provide better understanding on the food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environmental concern factors that influencing young consumers' intention to purchase and actual purchase of organic food. Furthermore, the organic food retailers or manufacturers could leverage on this findings for better planning, formulation and implementation of marketing strategies to the targeted young consumers in the developing countries.

Literature Review

Hierarchy of Effect Model (HEM)

Lavidge and Steiner (1961) introduced the HEM, and subsequently adapted by Barry and Howard (1990). HEM explained that consumers will go through different mental stages when making purchasing decisions. The dimensions of HEM model are cognitive (awareness, learning, knowing), affective (thinking, feeling), and conative (doing). The cognitive component refers to the knowledge and belief held by individual (Fill 2013). Beliefs can be developed from an individual's life experience, the outcome from direct observation and established by obtaining information or from inference (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). The affective dimension relates to the feeling towards and evaluation of the product (Chitty, Barker, Valos and Shimp 2011). Conative refers to the behavioural action (Agapito and Mendes 2013).

The HEM has been widely used to understanding consumer attitude and behaviour (Dubé, Cervellon, and Han 2003). Previous studies (i.e., Lee and Goudeau, 2014; Park and Yoo 2018; Mokhtar 2016) have applied HEM in their conceptual framework by using different constructs. For example, Lee and Goudeau (2014) have tested beliefs and utilitarian attitudes as cognition; hedonic attitudes, as affect; and attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty, as conative in consumer purchasing behaviour of organic food. In the context of mass customised products study, Park and Yoo (2018) have investigated consumers' perceived benefits, as cognitive, emotional product attachment and attitude, as affect; and loyalty intentions, as conation. Basaran (2016) asserted that different constructs should be used to test the three components of cognitive, affective, and conative in HEM.

Specifically, this study will investigate the consumers' motives of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern as cognitive dimension, which influence purchase intentions, as affective, and actual purchase, as conative. Therefore, the HEM underpins the conceptual framework of this study.

Food Safety Concern

Food safety concern is an important factor influencing organic food purchase intentions (Pham, Nguyen, Phan and Nguyen 2018; Hsu, Chang and Lin 2016, Wee, Ariff, Zakuan, Tajudin, Ismail and Ishak 2014; Padel and Foster 2005). In a study conducted in Malaysia, Dardak, Abidin and Ali (2009) found that majority 57% of their respondents have positive intention to purchase organic food due to food safety reason. Consumers believed organic food to be natural, which is free from chemical pesticides, mineral fertilisers and genetically modified organism which improve their health (Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence and Mummary 2002). Wee et al. (2014) also found that food safety had the greater influence on Malaysian consumers' purchase intentions of organic food. Michaelidou and Hassan (2008) asserted that product attributes value such as food safety influenced purchase intentions of organic food. Krystallis, Fotopoulos and Zotos (2006) concluded that consumers are concerned about the food safety which they are willing pay higher price to purchase organic food for values in return. The following hypothesis will be tested in this respect:

H₁: Young consumers' food safety concern has a positive influence on the purchase intentions of organic food.

Health Consciousness

Health consciousness refers to the desired state of well-being and focus to maintain a healthy life. Health consciousness is the most commonly stated motives for purchasing organic food by young consumers (Pham et al., 2018). Young consumers believed that organically grown foods are safer, better nutritional value and contribute to greater health benefits than conventional foods. In a study conducted in Taiwan, Hsu et al. (2016) found that health consciousness towards organic food had a significantly positive effect on purchase intentions. Magnusson et al. (2003) concluded that consumers with a strong intention to purchase organic food products believed in positive environmental, human health and animal welfare consequences. Furthermore, organic food which are free from pesticide residues, which would help improve consumers' health.

In contrast, Wee et al. (2014) reported that young consumers in Malaysia have lower purchase intention on organic food products being compared to older consumers. They concluded older consumers prioritised on health related reasons when purchasing organic food. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed to explore the relationship between health consciousness and purchase intentions:

H₂: Young consumers' health consciousness has a positive influence on the purchase intentions of organic food.

Affordability

Affordability refers to consumers' ability and willingness to pay for the offered product's price. Generally, organic food products are sold at a higher price in the market which raises the affordability issues. This has essentially been the barrier for consumers to develop positive purchase intentions toward organic food (Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Åberg and Sjöden 2001). Several scholars (i.e., See and Mansori 2012; Aryal, Chaudhary, Pandit and Sharma 2009) have reported that affordability is the important factor affecting consumers' purchase intentions towards organic food. See and Mansori (2012) asserted that affordability had significant positive effect on the young female consumers' purchase intentions of organic food in Malaysia. In a study conducted in Greece, Krystallis and Chrysosoidis (2005) found that younger consumers were more willing to purchase more quantities and higher price organic food products due to their greater environmental consciousness. However, Pham et al. (2018) discovered that young Vietnamese consumers' faced affordability issues due to high price of organic food that impeded their purchase intentions. The following hypothesis will be tested in this respect:

H₃: Young consumers' affordability has a positive influence on the purchase intentions of organic food.

Environmental Concern

Environmental concern reflects emotions related to environmental issues (Lee 2008). A few studies (i.e., Nguyen and Nguyen 2016; Hassan, Loi and Kok 2015; Basha et al. 2015) have found that environmental concern was a major determinant of consumer purchase behaviour of organic food products. The increasing awareness on environmental degradation has changed consumer attitude to purchase more environmental-friendly and organic products (Basha et al. 2015). Nguyen and Nguyen (2016) concluded that young consumers with higher education levels have higher awareness of the effective environmental actions which influenced their purchase intentions of organic food. Harper and Makatouni (2002) discovered that ethical concern on animal welfare was critical influencing factor in decision to purchase organic food.

In contrast, Leong and Paim (2015) asserted that young Malaysian college students or consumers seldom take environmental issues into consideration when shopping for organic food. They further commented that environmental concern factor is a non-significant predictor of the purchase intentions of organic food products for this category of consumers. Therefore, to explore the relationship between young consumers' *environmental concern* and purchase intentions, the following hypothesis will be examined:

H₄: Young consumers' environmental concern has a positive influence on the purchase intentions of

organic food.

Purchase Intentions

Purchase intention refers to “an individual’s conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a product” (Spears and Singh 2004). Intention is related to proximal measure of actual behaviour. Consumers with strong purchase intentions to purchase a product, will eventually lead to a willingness to pay for the product (Wu, Yeh and Hsiao 2011). Purchase intention is an important predictor to the purchase behaviour of the consumers (Phong 2011).

Actual Purchase

Actual purchase is the most important stage in the consumer buying process. Purchase intentions has positively influenced actual purchase behaviour of organic food products in Malaysia (Wee et al. 2014). They concluded that consumers perceived the organic food as more environmental friendly, safe and health benefits that lead to their purchases. Yadav and Pathak (2016) investigated consumers' green purchase behaviour in India, and found that purchase intentions had significantly influenced actual purchase. Lim, Li and Suryadi (2014) reported positive relationship between purchase intentions and actual purchase of organic food. Therefore, to explore the relationship between young consumers’ purchase intentions and actual purchase, the following hypothesis will be examined:

H₅: Purchase intentions has a positive influence on the actual purchase of organic food.

Conceptual Framework

The hypotheses for this study are formed to investigate the four independent variables of food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern toward purchase intentions. In addition, purchase intentions is correlated to actual purchase to draw a conclusion on the important final stage of consumers' process of purchasing a product.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

The population in this study were individuals aged 24 and below in Malaysia, who are existing consumers of organic food. The population of this study is estimated at 5 million (Malaysia Demographics Profile 2018). Raosoft sample size calculator is used to calculate the sample size and set with a confidence level of 95% and margin error at 5% (Raosoft 2018). A minimum sample size of 385 was suggested to be taken from the target population. Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson (2010) asserted that a minimum sample size of 150 is required for SEM analysis for six constructs in the structural model. We have determined a sample size of 398 for this study to meet the requirement

for SEM analysis. Pilot test was conducted to test the survey questionnaires on 20 respondents. The respondents were selected using nonprobability convenience sampling method. We have targeted consumers who present at the selected supermarkets and specialty retail outlets selling organic food products in Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Non-probability convenience sampling method provides flexibility to the researchers as the sample can be accessed easily and higher survey response rate is achieved. The survey using self-administered survey questionnaires was conducted between Jun and July 2018.

The survey instrument was designed with 27 items assessed by a six point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree and 6: strongly agree). The scale measured food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability, environment concern, purchase intentions, and actual purchase. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used to perform descriptive analysis, validity and reliability analysis. The AMOS version 24 was used to perform the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis to test the hypothetical relationships between the proposed constructs.

Results

Descriptive Results

The sample's demographic profile is shown in Table 1. The respondents were mostly female (55%), majority belongs to income category between RM3,000 to RM5,000 (35%), well educated with undergraduate level (57%), medium frequency of purchase between 4 to 6 times within a week (39%), and highest purchase of organic vegetables (38%).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Demographics	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	45%
Female	55%
Total	100%
<i>Income level</i>	
Below RM3,000	20%
RM3,000 – RM5,000	35%
RM5,000 – RM7,000	30%
Above RM7,000	15%
Total	100%
<i>Education level</i>	
Non-graduate	43%
Undergraduate	57%
Total	100%
<i>Frequency of purchase organic food within a week</i>	
1-3 times	26%
4-6 times	39%
7-9 times	25%
More than 10 time	10%
Total	100%
<i>Frequent purchase organic food type</i>	
Vegetables	38%
Poultry and Meat	20%
Fruits	16%
Noodles and Pastas	10%
Dairies	6%

Others	10%
Total	100%

Scale Reliability and Factor Analysis

The measurement model need to be assessed for unidimensionality, validity and reliability before modeling the structural model. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), Cronbach's Alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) results are presented in Table 2. The reliability assessment is performed based on the internal reliability and CR. Internal reliability is achieved when the Cronbach's Alpha value is greater than 0.7, which indicated a high level of internal consistency in the data (Pallant 2007). For this study, the Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs is above 0.7. The values of CR for the six constructs were between 0.823 and 0.9, higher than the threshold level of 0.7. The CR values were 0.898 (food safety concern), 0.842 (health consciousness), 0.904 (affordability), 0.826 (environmental concern), 0.893 (purchase intentions) and 0.868 (actual purchase).

Validity refers to the ability of instruments to measure what it supposed to be measured for a construct. Using the guidelines suggested by Hair et al. (2010), convergent validity was achieved by checking all standardised values of factor loadings, which were above 0.5, the minimum acceptance level required. The AVE values were greater than 0.5, achieved the minimum level required (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Hence, the reliability and validity results have proven exist a significant confidence of the survey instrument quality.

Table 2: CFA, Cronbach's Alpha, CR and AVE results for the measurement model

Construct	Item	Statement	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Food Safety Concern	FS1	Organic food products are safer to eat.	.774	.896	.898	.799
	FS2	Organic food is free from pesticides, fertilizers and genetic modifications.	.831			
	FS3	Organic food products are natural food.	.873			
	FS4	Organic food contain less health risk.	.820			
	FS5	Organic food logo signified the high quality standard of the products.	.687			
Health Consciousness	HC1	Organic food is nutritional that improves my health.	.678	.858	.842	.572
	HC2	Organic food products are healthier than conventionally grown food.	.767			
	HC3	Organic food is higher in quality that promotes my health.	.765			
	HC4	Organic food supported my healthy lifestyle.	.810			
	HC5	I consume organic food to promote my long-term health benefits.	.694			
Affordability	AF1	I can afford to purchase organic food.	.765	.900	.904	.702
	AF2	The price of the organic food is reasonable.	.896			
	AF3	Organic food is value for money.	.906			
	AF4	I am willing to pay higher price for organic food.	.775			
Environmental Concern	EC1	Organic food is produced using environmental friendly methods.	.667	.823	.826	.545
	EC2	Organic food consumption will help to protect the environment.	.762			
	EC3	I buy organic food because I am concerned about animal welfare.	.824			
	EC4	I buy organic food because I supported the environmental sustainability.	.690			
Purchase Intentions	PI1	I am willing to buy organic food instead of conventional food while shopping.	.726	.890	.893	.785
	PI2	I am willing to buy organic food because the benefits outweigh the costs.	.807			
	PI3	I have positive attitude to purchase organic food.	.861			
	PI4	It is likely that I will purchase organic food.	.876			
	PI5	I intend to purchase organic food in the near future.	.672			
Actual Purchase	AP1	I am a regular purchaser of organic food.	.794	.867	.868	.621
	AP2	My purchase proportion of organic food is relatively higher compared to conventional food.	.764			
	AP3	I purchased organic food for my own consumption.	.802			
	AP4	I purchased organic food for my family members.	.792			

Model Compatibility Testing

The research model has achieved a good fit as shown in Table 3. The *Chi-Square* value is 780.077 and according to Barrett (2007), chi square probability value greater than 0.05 indicates acceptable model fit. The ratio of χ^2/df was 2.492 which is lower than the value 3.0, as suggested by Byrne (2001). The absolute index with RMSEA of 0.061, achieved lower than 0.08 (Browne and Cudeck 1993). Incremental fit indices were greater than 0.9, with IFI of 0.926, CFI of 0.925 and TLI of 0.916.

Table 3: Structure model assessment and hypothesis testing

Model fit indices			
Chi-square		780.077	
Degree of freedom		313	
Probability level		0.000	
RMSEA		0.061	
IFI		0.926	
CFI		0.925	
TLI		0.916	
ChiSq/df		2.492	
Hypothesized relationships	Estimate	p Values	Result
H ₁ FS → PI	0.269	***	Supported
H ₂ HC → PI	0.303	***	Supported
H ₃ AF → PI	0.001	0.982	Rejected
H ₄ EC → PI	0.291	***	Supported
H ₅ PI → AP	0.501	***	Supported

The normality assessment was performed and shown that the data is normally distributed with value of skewness between -1.0 and 1.0, and kurtosis of between -3.0 and 3.0. Subsequently, the estimated path coefficients were derived and the research hypotheses were examined.

Model Causality Testing

The final structural model is shown in Figure 1. The regression weights and probability value that indicates its significance is presented in Table 3. The findings indicated that food safety concern has significant positive effect (0.269) on purchase intentions and H₁ is accepted. The results have supported the previous study by Wee et al. (2014). H₂ is accepted and health consciousness has significant effect on purchase intentions (0.303). In fact, this correlation coefficient value is the strongest on purchase intentions compared to other constructs. Consumers believed that the organic food provided good health values that encourages their purchase intentions. The findings obtained are consistent with the previous studies by Hsu et al. (2016) and Magnusson et al. (2003).

The regression coefficient of the relationship between affordability and purchase intentions is not significant (0.001). As a result, H₃ is rejected. The regression coefficient of the relationship between environment concern and purchase intentions is significant (0.291) and H₄ is accepted. The results have supported the previous study by Pham et al. (2018). Finally, purchase intentions had positive significant (0.501) influence on actual purchase, and H₅ is accepted. The results have supported the previous studies by Lim et al. (2014), and Yadav and Pathak (2016).

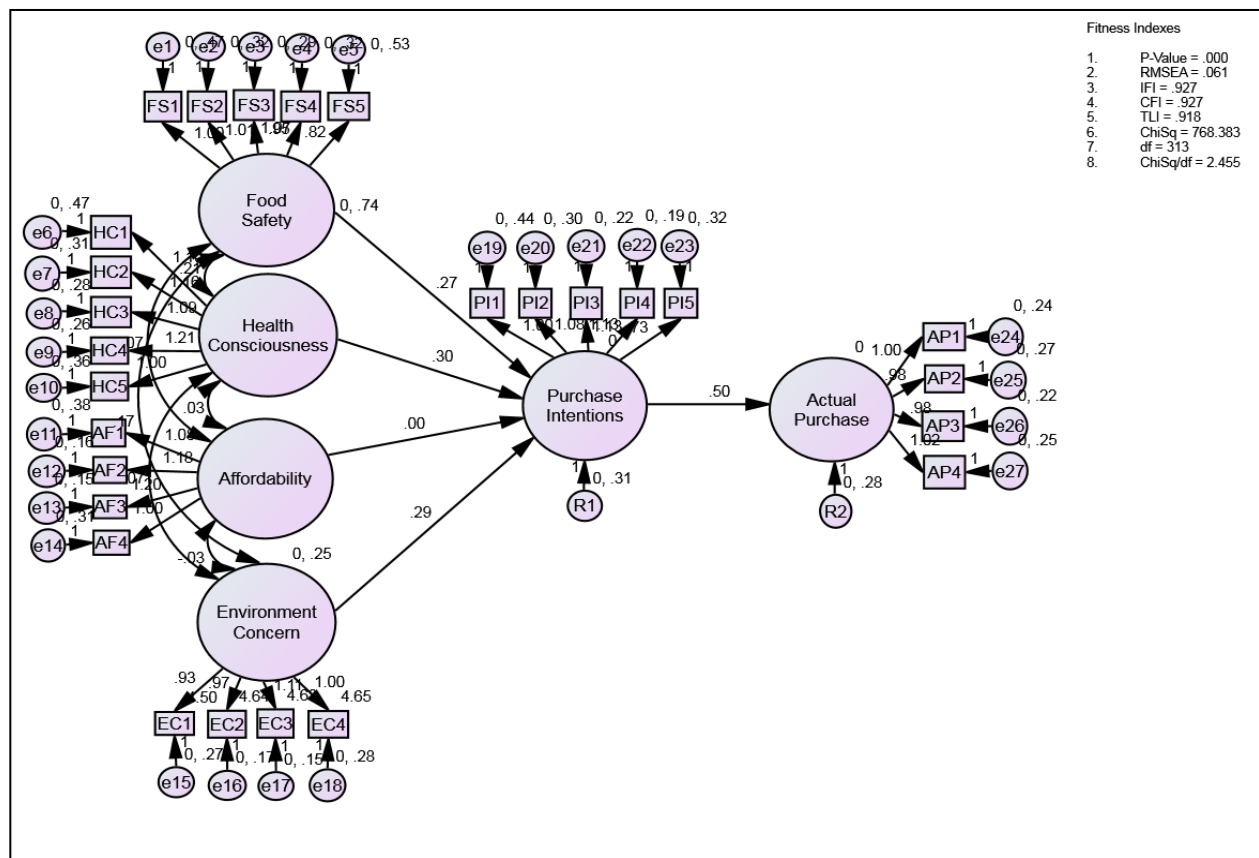


Figure 1: The structural model

Discussion

Overall, the findings indicated that young consumers in a developing country, Malaysia have prioritised on food safety concern, health consciousness, and environment concern as their motives to purchase organic food. The government have to promote food safety assurance for organic food products sold in the market to motivate consumers to purchase the products. As highlighted by Thøgersen, Pedersen, Paternoga, Schwendel and Aschemann-Witzel (2017) that food safety information had the biggest impact on consumer purchasing decision of organic food. The credibility of organic certification logos should be use as the assurance tool, and more organic food products should be carrying the certification logo. The policymakers could leverage on this study findings to

further promote the organic certification logos. For example, the sole Malaysian organic logo is “myOrganic” logo should be made known to the young consumers’ through promotional events and advertisements in social media, televisions or newspapers. Nation-wide awareness campaigns and events could also enhance the public’s knowledge on organic food such as farming and production methods that complies with the green environment. Furthermore, the government should also look into strengthening legislations related to organic certification and logos to build better consumers’ trust on organic food.

Empirical results in this study shown that young consumers have strong concerns about health, which drive them to purchase organic food. Young consumers believed that organic food are better in nutritional values, quality, safety and health benefits. The findings suggest that retailers should explore new media channels, especially social media, to the targeted young consumers in disseminating information and facts about the health benefits, nutrition facts, organic farming method associated with organic food. Furthermore, more organic food restaurants and retail outlets should be established at universities or colleges targeting young consumers to promote healthy eating. Affordability is found to be the barrier for purchasing of organic food for young Malaysian consumers. We can conclude that the young consumers’ perceived organic food is sold at high price in the market, which affected their purchasing power. Hence, the price of organic food should be reduced through encouraging more locally produced organic food products that is lesser in costs. Malaysia still depend heavily on imported organic food (Somasundram, Razali and Santhirasegaram 2016), which have contributed to high pricing due to import duties. With that, the government should support local organic farmers by providing more subsidies and financial assistance to encourage more locally produced organic food products. It is also recommended that organic food manufacturers and retailers should prioritised on the nutritional value, long term health benefits, environmental concern and make the organic food products for affordable to the young consumers. Consumers are increasingly demanding food products that are produced without environmental exploitation (Chen 2009). In the aspect of environment concern, the environment friendly concept of organic food should be prioritised. The government, manufacturers or retailers could work together with relevant non-government organisations (NGOs) in environmental rights to further promote organic food to the young consumers.

The theoretical contribution of this study is the validation and development of HEM in the organic food purchase context. In this study, food safety concern, health consciousness and environment concern have shown to be important constructs that influenced purchase intentions and actual purchase behaviour. Therefore, food safety concern, health consciousness and environment concern should be incorporated in the HEM as influencing factors under cognitive towards affective and conative. Furthermore, the findings have validated the three stages of HEM model of cognitive (motivational factors), affective (purchase intentions) and conative (actual purchase) components. From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study provide valuable information to organic food retailers or marketers in developing countries seeking to improve their sales and achieve continuous business growth. Retailers or marketers could plan and implement more effective

targeting and positioning strategies to increase young consumers' demand on the organic food products.

Conclusion

As for the limitations of this study, the investigation was only observed through the influence of the food safety concern, health consciousness, affordability and environment concern constructs. Future studies should consider other motivational factors such as past experience, trust, cultural or even demographic that influence young consumers' purchase intentions and actual purchase of organic food. In addition, this study has focused on a developing country, Malaysia. Comparative studies between developing and developed countries could be explored to provide clarifying differences in young consumers' purchase behavior towards organic food. Future research may also adopt mixed research methods of quantitative and qualitative. The relationship between the motivating factors, consumer purchase intentions and actual purchase could be in depth investigated by using both quantitative and qualitative method to produce better quality presentation of data analysis for the study.

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