Organic Food Purchase Behaviour

A Mediation-Moderation Model

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Introduction and research aim

Organically produced food has been recognised as an important factor for addressing unsustainable food consumption, which is criticised as a primary contributor to non-communicable diseases and ecological degradation (Notarnicola et al., 2017). Extant research has revealed the motives, barriers, and determinants of the purchase and consumption of organic food (Rana & Paul, 2017). However, scant research has systematically investigated relationships between such dimensions (Dorce et al., 2021; Kushwah et al., 2019). More complex models underpinned by multi-theories to understand sustainable consumption as organic food purchases have been encouraged (Koklic et al., 2019) with the inclusion of moderating and mediating variables (Eberle et al., 2022). This study aims to contribute to the literature by presenting an integrative model that explains how different factors affect consumers' attitudes and purchase behaviour towards organic food.

Underpinning theories and concepts

Perceived benefits of a product relate to associated consumer values and motives, which also inform consumers' attitudes and behaviour (Dorce et al., 2021). Motives are the primary facilitators of behaviour. Consumers consider various motives in the context of sustainable food choice: egoistic, hedonic, and altruistic (Honkanen et al., 2006); the significance or associated hierarchy may vary across contexts, such as culture and product categories (Eberly et al., 2022).

Knowledge – Attitude – Behaviour (KAB) theory is a rational choice theory, which assumes that different levels of knowledge vary in attitudes toward a behaviour, which then turns into behaviour execution (Kallgren & Wood, 1986). The theory explains the knowledge–behaviour gap, which is often related to sustainable behaviour. However, empirical support for the KAB theory in sustainable food consumption is still lacking (Martin & Simintiras, 1995).

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen (1991) shows power in explaining volitional sustainable behaviour constrained by resources (i.e. time, money) and effort, such as organic food purchases (Scalco et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the theory has received criticism for its limitation in predicting long-term behaviour and overlooking explicit motivational content (Abu Hatab et al., 2022). Researchers recommend consideration of how temporal frames link to the motivation of sustainable behaviour (Hall & Fong, 2007).

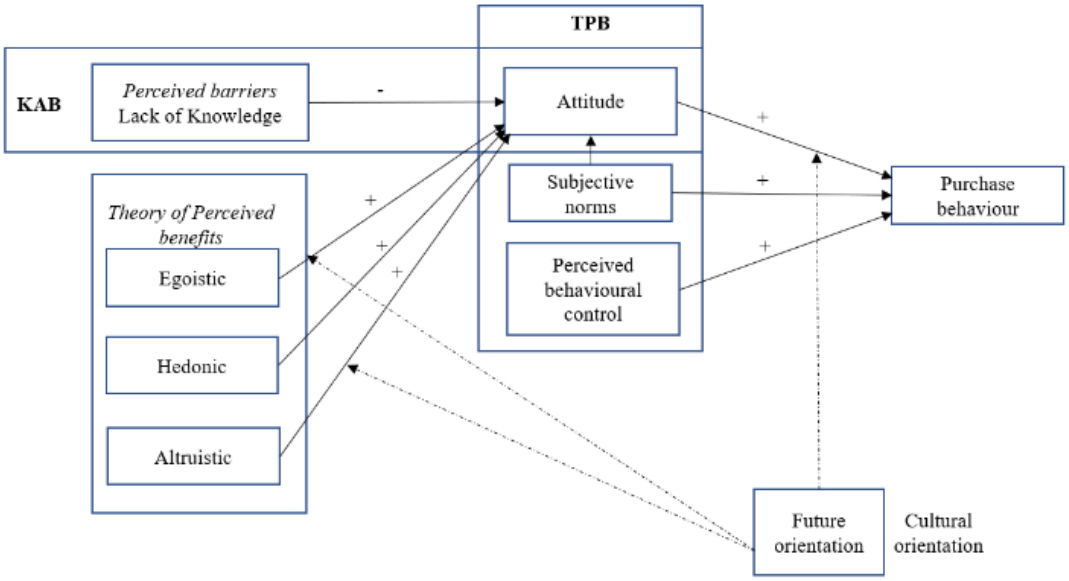
Future orientation is a culturally temporal value that reflects the extent to which individuals in societies engage in a particular behaviour with their concerns about its future outcomes (Carmi & Arnon, 2014). Future orientation is a foremost factor in sustainable consumption as consumers weigh trade-offs between immediate gains (i.e., good taste) and distant gains (i.e., health) (Gad Mohsen & Dacko, 2013). Chekima et al. (2019) suggest the moderating effects of future orientation on the relationships between product attributes, environmental attitude and organic food consumption. Still, the authors encourage further research to elicit its role in organic food contexts.

Proposed conceptual model for organic food purchase and consumption

Figure 1 illustrates an integrative framework for understanding organic food purchase. This model links components of the KAB, perceived benefits, and cultural values with organic food purchase intention through key behavioural determinants in the TPB, including attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (PBC).

As shown in Figure 1, organic food consumption's perceived benefits and barriers exert attitudes toward the related purchase. Lacking knowledge, the main prohibitor to following a healthier diet with sustainable products such as organic food (Rana & Paul, 2017), impacts attitudes negatively. In contrast, egoistic benefits (e.g., health and safety), hedonic benefits (e.g., sensory enjoyment), and altruistic benefits (e.g., good for farmers, animals, and the environment) serving as primary drivers of organic food purchase pose positive impacts on attitudes. Consumers often consider the contributions of organic food to personal and others' well-being compared to non-organic alternatives when making purchase decisions (Honkanen et al., 2006). Social influences reflected by subjective norms and self-control perception presented by PBC are also positively related to the behaviour (Scalco et al., 2017). Attitude is expected to partially mediate the relationships between benefits, barriers, subjective norms, and purchase behaviour. Future orientation, a culturally temporal value, strengthens the impacts of egoistic and altruistic benefits on attitudes and the impact of attitudes on purchase behaviour. Recent research reveals that consistency between attitude and health-supporting behaviour is stronger when future orientation is high (Chekima et al., 2019).

Figure 1 – The integrative approach for purchase behaviour toward organic food



Contributions and implications

This study responds to calls for more advanced theoretical research into sustainable food consumption (Koklic et al., 2019). The combination of different theories in the conceptual model presented in this paper is expected to bring a more insightful perspective on consumers' purchase behaviour toward sustainable food options. Firstly, the integration of the applied influential theories, including KAB, TPB, theory of perceived benefits, and cultural value theory, should provide wider insights into what encourages and hinders consumers' organic food choices. Importantly, it elicits multi-dimensional benefits and interactions in predicting organic food purchase behaviour. Second, the integrative approach explains attitude formation, which is the significant predictor of sustainable food purchases in prior research. The importance of attitude drives by its direct impact on behaviour and indirect pathways. Third, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first framework suggesting the moderating role of cultural values in the causal chain of benefits – attitudes – purchase behaviour in the sustainable food context. In the case of a high future orientation, egoistic and altruistic benefits and credence quality aspects of organic food are expected to show stronger impacts on attitudes toward consuming the product; the relationship between attitude and purchase behaviour is also anticipated to reinforce. Fourth, adding a cultural value can justify the discrepancies in promoting organic food products in different markets and cultural groups.

Overall, this study will also support stakeholders interested in promoting sustainable food consumption and organic food. A better understanding of what leads consumers to purchase behaviour can be the foundation for effective campaigns for public health organisations and marketers.

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