

Determinants of Consumer Purchase Decision Towards Online Organic Fresh Produce in Malaysia: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Organic fresh produce has been experiencing a steady growth around the world due to its multiple benefits from the perspective of health, safety, and environment. Despite the growth, the organic fresh produce market in Malaysia remains niche. Since 2020, the world had been hit with the COVID-19 pandemic which significantly affected society and consumers especially changes in lifestyle and business practices. As a result, organic food producers and marketers have ventured into e-commerce whereby organic fresh produce is sold online to sustain their businesses. Over the past years, numerous studies have been conducted to ascertain the factors and barriers influencing Malaysians' organic food consumption. However, limited research is done in the areas of e-commerce organic fresh produce. It is also noted that these studies are done before the COVID-19 pandemic, as such the nuances of pandemic and its influence on consumer behaviour have not been established in the literature. It is crucial to know

the drivers of online organic fresh produce purchase decisions and to understand the changes in purchase decisions towards consumptions products post-pandemic. By using the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this conceptual paper identifies the determinants of consumer purchase decision towards online organic fresh produce such as perceived price, perceived product quality, electronic word of mouth and the impact of COVID-19. The paper further reviews past literature of the determinants and finally proposes a research framework for future research.

Keywords: Online Organic Fresh Produce, Perceived Price, Perceived Product Quality, eWOM, Impact of COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Environmental challenges have become increasingly serious in recent years, and they have become one of the most pressing global concerns. The realisation that human activities are degrading natural resources has resulted in green environmental awareness and environmental protection among consumers worldwide. Consumers are also concerned about the impact of their purchases on the environment. According to Forbes (2021), many consumers around the world have realised that their consumption habits may contribute to the accelerated deterioration of environmental problems, and as a result, many of them are beginning to pay attention to environmental issues and begin purchasing sustainable products, such as the consumption behaviour of purchasing green products, which has become increasingly popular internationally in recent years.

Consumers have begun to question the safety of the food they consume because of frequent press coverage of a variety of food controversies, such as high pesticide content levels in fruits and vegetables (Winter & Davis, 2006), milk contamination and pathogenic infection with livestock (Forbes, 2021). Additionally, the new food technology such as genetically modified organisms (GMO) and the use of numerous types of artificial food additives evoked concern among consumers and altered their intention towards organic food as it is perceived as safe and nutritious (Morgera et al., 2012). As a result of this steady rise in environmental consciousness, the worldwide market's demand for environmentally friendly products has increased.

Fresh produce is a general term that refers to a group of farm-produced crops, which includes fruits and vegetables, as well as other items. Organic fresh produce is defined as organic products that have been produced, processed, or handled following organic standards, in which it is prohibited to use modern synthetic chemicals in their production, processing, or handling. Also, the processing techniques precluded irradiation, food additives and industrial solvents. Thus, it is considered natural and fresh. Similarly, organic livestock is also free from steroids, growth hormones, antibiotics and other additives. They are entirely homegrown naturally without any additional treatments. In the last few years, there has been a significant shift in the Malaysian market's overall trend. Urban consumers in

Malaysia are increasingly interested in purchasing environmentally friendly products and this opens numerous opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to supply organic fresh produce such as fruits, vegetables, and meats.

Among the food industries in both developed and developing countries, the organic fresh produce industry is one of the fastest-growing markets. According to Technovio (2019), global sales of organic fresh produce are expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15 percent, reaching USD 62.23 billion during 2019 - 2023. The increasing consumer awareness of the health benefits of organic food, as well as the increased availability of organic food products due to the increase of organic farming around the world, has helped to boost this niche segment. Furthermore, it is expected that sustainable organic fresh produce production will have a positive impact on the growth of organic fresh produce soon. In Malaysia, the organic market has garnered much attention from being a niche industry to becoming an industry with significant growth potential. Lian and Yoong (2019) mentioned that the consumption rate increases over time with more demand for organic vegetables, meat and poultry products. Malaysia's organic food industry is worth RM20 million annually, with demand expected to grow at a rate of 12.4% per year (Suhaimie et al., 2016).

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the countries

impacted by the pandemic impose Movement Control Order (MCO) and other movement restrictions, which had also ushered a “new normal” situation among the consumers and businesses (Latip et al., 2021). The pandemic changed consumer attitudes and product buying decisions, notably in the context of people's health and well-being, due to the general necessary changes in lifestyle and business practices to prevent infections. It has increased consumer demand for organic food products, as consumers believe these products will boost immunity and act as an ammunition against the virus. As a result, organic food producers and marketers found an alternative solution for marketing and distribution due to the altered situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Having said that fresh produce is the essential item for living, many organic business owners had adopted e-commerce to market their products. Despite the pandemic, organic food products worldwide are experiencing a significant increase in sales (Bio et al., 2021).

Despite the booming e-commerce all around the world, little is known about the determinants that encourage the consumer to buy online organic fresh produces. Though many past studies were done on organic fresh produce, limited information is found about the online organic fresh produce environment, especially in Malaysia. Also, much past research are done before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is crucial to know if the “new normal” situation has altered consumers’ purchase decisions towards online organic fresh produce. As a matter of fact, given the reality that organic fresh products are safer,

healthier and more environmental friendly, there is an urgent need to investigate the changes among Malaysian consumers in order to address the likelihood of long-term health implications.

Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour as the underpinning theory, this conceptual paper provides an overview of the determinants influencing online organic fresh produce and its relationship with purchase decision. Perceived price, perceived product quality, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic are selected variables which will be further analysed to explain the decision on online to purchase organic fresh produce. Finally, the paper concludes the need for an empirical study to investigate how these variables play an important role in determining the decision to purchase online organic fresh produce.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

This research study adopted the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to accomplish the research objectives. TPB model was proposed by Ajzen in 1985 to predict consumer behaviour especially when the behaviour is intentional (Ajzen, 1991). There are three major predictors of an intention to perform behaviour which is attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. These three variables account for a substantial amount of variation in actual behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

Attitudes toward behaviour describe how those in the individual's immediate environment feel about a particular

behaviour, and how these feelings are influenced by the strength of behavioural beliefs and the evaluation of possible results. Subjective norms refer to the way in which the perceptions of others can influence how a behaviour is performed (Hasan & Suciarto, 2020). Whereas individual perceptions of the availability or lack of necessary resources and opportunities to develop a specific behaviour are referred to as perceived behavioural control. TPB has demonstrated to be an excellent framework for conceptualising, measuring, and identifying determinants that affect behaviour (Montano et al., 1997).

Similarly, many past research utilised TPB in organic food product studies by adopting the original model and some by extending or modifying the TPB model (Hasan & Suciarto, 2020; Unal et al., 2019; Sultan et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2015). In this current study, TPB is extended to fit into the context of online organic fresh produce purchase decision by utilising the following variables: perceived price, perceived product quality, eWOM and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Perceived Price

The price can be simply defined as an economic cost that confirms and covers the production price. Kar, Meena & Patnaik (2018) found that one of the most influential combinations in organic product marketing has always been sustainable consumer goods. According to Hayat, Nadeem and Jan (2018), different purchasing processes are closely linked to cost savings and pricing. Even environmentally conscious customers have had

issues with sustainable products' ridiculous prices. Key issues identified in implementation areas with growing environmental concerns are related to overpriced factors (Utami, Sadeli and Perdana, 2016).

Pricing is an important factor in encouraging consumers to buy since it has an impact on how consumers perceive prices and values and their purchase decisions (Rosa et al., 2011). Similarly, Hamilton and Chernev (2013) found that consumers' choices of retailers as well as items and brands may be influenced by price. It can be said that customers' purchase decisions are heavily influenced by price, and organic fresh produce products are perceived as more expensive.

Due to higher technological costs, many organic food products on the market today are more expensive than standard commodities. Organic fresh produce is purchased based on price and value. Additionally, research indicates that consumers are less willing to purchase sustainable food products if they are not reasonably priced against conventional foods (Aryal et al., 2009). According to Sharaf and Perumal (2018), price is the most important factor for customers, as they desire to discover more affordable prices as the market grows and to have access to a variety of products that provide larger returns. The decision to pay a premium is related to the perceived worth of the goods and not just to the actual price (Moser, 2015). However, due to the benefit gained from organic fresh produce, some consumers are willing to pay a premium price for these products. According to Suki and

Suki (2015), 80 percent of Malaysian consumers are willing to buy organic fresh produce for a higher price for environment-friendly organic products. Abzari, Sharbiyani & Morad (2013) also opined that consumers are willing to pay a higher price if they gain more benefits than costs.

2.3 Perceived Product Quality

Kotler and Armstrong (2008) defined product quality as having the ability to exhibit a product in its function with additional product features such as durability, dependability, accuracy, and ease of use. On the other hand, perceived product quality refers to the consumer's perceptions of the product's quality (Tsiotsou, 2006). According to Magnier et al. (2016), perceived quality can be seen as a key entity in customer perception evaluation considering the total benefits of a specific product. On the other hand, perceived product quality refers to the consumer's perceptions of the product's quality (Tsiotsou, 2006). Therefore, this variable will look at the consumers' perception of the quality of the organic produce purchased.

As the demand for organic fresh produce is on the rise, customers' attention is drawn to the perceived quality of the fresh produce. Fresh produce attributes such as freshness, shelf life, nutritional value and packaging play an important role in an online purchase decision. Similarly, Groff et al. (1993) discovered that factors such as freshness, flavour, nutrition, safety, appearance, where it's grown and brand influences

consumer preferences for fresh produce purchase.

However, quality evaluations are limited as they are unable to inspect the freshness and appearance when buying from online purchasing. Consumers are left only with the information provided by the business owners to evaluate the product quality. Similarly, it is supported by Martinez et al., (2018) that online shoppers may be hesitant to buy healthy perishable foods like vegetables or lean meat since they cannot physically inspect the items for quality and freshness before purchasing.

In addition to the quality and other attributes of the food products, consumers perceive the quality of organic food based on the organic certification label (Loebnitz & Aschemann-Witzel, 2016). Consumers tend to have high standards when it comes to organic food performance and expectations. Thus, consumers' perception of product quality can have an important impact on their purchase decisions. In many circumstances, the perceived product quality is the deciding factor for the customer. Nedra et al., (2015) found that perceived product quality is one of the most powerful motivators for organic product consumption in Malaysia.

2.4 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

The rapid growth of the internet allows a new communication platform that empowers both suppliers and customers in the means of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Over the years, eWOM has become one of the most valuable

information sources since it comprises peer opinions and experiences rather than company-provided material (Siwar et al., 2019). Although it is an informal exchange of opinions amongst customers, it also decreases the ambiguity about product selection, and at the same time allows consumers to make the appropriate selections. According to Sukri & Waemustafa (2015), eWOM remains an integral part of buying decisions. Similarly, Jorgensen & Ha (2019) opinionated that eWOM plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviour.

eWOM can be divided into two; the first is company-generated content to promote the products and services and the second user-generated content shared by consumers consisting of their opinion and experience with the said product (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2020; Muda & Khan, 2020). In this study, eWOM will be analysed from the perspective of user-generated content by organic fresh produce consumers.

Different platforms allow consumers to participate in eWOM. Nonetheless, social media is viewed as an ideal medium for eWOM because of its wider reach and increased social interaction because of people expressing their ideas and experiences about brand-related information (Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Muda & Khan, 2020). These users-generated content is seen as reviews provided voluntarily by users who have used the products. It can be in the form of written reviews and in the form of pictures and video. It is a common practice among customers nowadays to consult the reviews and ratings of other

customers before deciding on the products or services to purchase (Tajuddin et al., 2020). Past research established that consumers perceive user-generated content as more credible compared to company-generated content (Saridakis, & Hartmans, 2014).

2.5 The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019 (Taylor, 2021). The airborne Coronavirus disease then spread throughout the world and was classified as a “pandemic” by the World Health Organisation in March 2020 (WHO, 2021). The affected countries had imposed significant movement restrictions worldwide and within states and countries by exercising total lockdowns and movement control order (MCO) to curb the spread of infection. In Malaysia, many non-essential businesses were not allowed to operate except for essential services and products such as for consumption and basic needs (Hamdan, 2020).

Even though things are likely to get better in the coming years, the COVID-19 pandemic has already had a significant impact on society and consumers, pointing to the market's future dynamic shifts (Mehta et al., 2020). This is especially evident in the organic fresh produce market as there has been a noticeable increase in organic fresh produce products. Qi and Ploeger (2021) and Scacchi et al. (2021) reported that consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the health and safety elements of their food consumption and wish to enhance their immune systems by eating healthier. The pandemic has also caused a shift

in food systems and how individuals buy and consume food.

Health consciousness can be defined as the degree to which individuals pay attention to their overall wellbeing (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Health consciousness invokes individuals' preventive health behaviours such as consuming nutritious foods and maintaining an active body. As a result of the changing lifestyles and increasing awareness of quality food products, this has increased the demand for organic food (Prakash et al, 2018). According to Prentice et al., (2019), health consciousness is one of the most important elements considered during purchase decisions. Health-conscious consumers will seek out nutritious fresh produce as they are motivated to improve and maintain their health, quality of life, and prevent diseases by participating in healthy and self-conscious behaviours (Shin and Mattila, 2019). Therefore, understanding health consciousness drivers during a pandemic will benefit organic food consumption practices.

Due to the pandemic, consumers prefer to stay indoors and purchase essential consumer products online. To curb the situation, businesses and marketers in the organic and green food sectors had also accelerated their business objectives and capabilities to keep pace with altering consumer preferences for their products and services (Qi & Ploeger, 2021). Many businesses have resorted to e-commerce by offering online purchasing and door deliveries and store pick up. Similarly, in a

study conducted by Smiglak-Krajewska & Wojciechowska-Solis (2021), it was noted that despite the limitation of online shopping, they became more popular during the epidemic and businesses which made it feasible to purchase online earned significant new customers. Online purchasing is advantageous during the pandemic as it reduces the danger of infection by avoiding interaction with other individuals (Koch, Frommeyer & Schewe, 2020). Apart from that, online shopping has become increasingly popular over the years due to its timesaving, seamless and worry-free characteristics as it can be done anytime and anywhere (Delafrouz et al., 2009).

2.6 Consumer Purchase Decision

The purchase decision is a series of choices made by a consumer prior to making a purchase, which begins when he or she expresses a willingness to meet a need (Hanaysha, 2018). Consumer purchasing decision encompasses all aspects of the purchasing process, from pre-purchase activities to post-purchase consumption and evaluation. It also looks into consumers' behaviour and their role in the selection and use processes. Organic food purchasing behaviour refers to the behaviour of consumers that purchases food product that has not been treated with irradiation, industrial solvents, or chemical food stabilisers, and that do not contain any additional ingredients, as defined by Allen & Albala (2007).

Since consumer awareness of organic foods does not always translate into actual consumption, it is difficult to define

the purchasing decision-making process (Briz & Ward, 2009). In the online environment, it is rather tricky to understand consumers' purchase decisions due to the lack of sensory evaluation such as touch, see and feel. However, marketers can influence these decisions by providing information about their products that can help consumers evaluate them (Hanaysha, 2018). Past research has identified few determinants that ignite consumers to buy organic fresh produce such as perceived quality (Lian & Rajadurai, 2020), eWOM (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2020; Muda & Khan, 2020), price (Suki & Suki, 2015) and trust (Lian & Rajadurai, 2020). Therefore, this paper will look into the determinants of online organic fresh produce using perceived product quality, perceived price, eWOM and the impact of COVID-19.

3 Proposed Framework

Based on the discussion, literature shows that perceived price, perceived product quality, eWOM and the impact of COVID-19 influence the purchase decision of online organic fresh produce. With TPB grounding the research, it is well established that the determinant of the purchase decision is closely linked with product quality, the price of the organic fresh produce, reviews, and influence from eWOM and also the impact of COVID-19 such as limited movements during the pandemic and increasing health consciousness.

Price has always been an indicator of organic product purchasing behaviour, and it has always influenced organic

product purchase behaviour positively (Boztepe, 2012). Price usually reduces the influence of the respondents' organic food value in the purchasing process (Melovic et al., 2020). Perceived price stands as an important indicator to consumers as they prefer alternatives with cheaper prices (Sharaf & Perumal, 2018). Similarly, perceived product quality is also an important factor in organic food purchases. According to Khan et al., (2015), perceived product quality is one of the strongest motivations for organic food products. Notably, organic fresh produce consumers will constantly rely on user-generated content to assist them in making a purchasing decision (Bae & Lee, 2011).

Although user-generated content eWOM is created by consumers and is based on their personal experiences, research has shown that these contents are more trustworthy, useful and objective than other approaches (Verhellen, Dens, & Pelsmacker, 2013). Also, increasing health consciousness and seeking alternative options to buying fresh produce during pandemics had contributed to purchase decisions.

Based on the discussion above, the paper proposes a theoretical framework to study the relationship between perceived price, perceived product quality, eWOM and the impact of COVID-19 and purchase decisions towards online organic fresh produce (Figure 1).

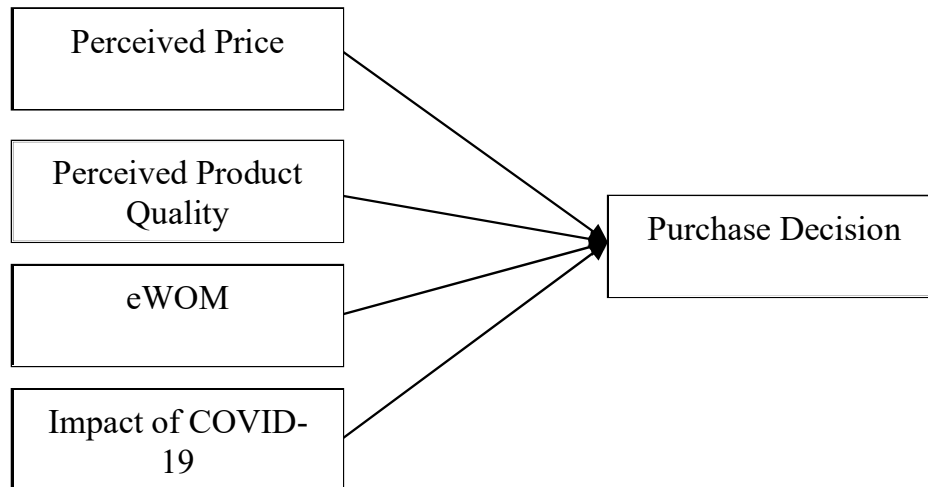


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

4 Conclusion and Future Research Direction

This conceptual analysis on the determinants of online organic fresh produce purchase decisions in Malaysia has yielded some intriguing findings. First of all, this paper developed a conceptual framework grounded upon TPB on organic fresh products in Malaysia. And then, the paper discussed the critical importance of conducting a future empirical study to investigate the determinant factors of online organic fresh produce purchase decisions in Malaysia. Hence, a further study is proposed to examine online organic fresh produce purchase decisions in Malaysia. An empirical research using quantitative analysis is proposed for primary data collection using a questionnaire.

The findings would be able to provide more information about the factors determining online organic fresh produce purchase intention. The findings will also contribute to the body of literature by extending TPB to examine the critical

determinants of online organic fresh produce such as impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and eWOM from the perspective of user-generated content, which is lacking in literature. Through this research, a deeper understanding of online organic fresh produce can be achieved and to understand the changing trend of consumer behaviour post pandemic.

An empirical study will also be useful for organic food producers and retailers in developing countries who are looking for ways to increase sales and achieve long-term business growth post-COVID-19 pandemic. It can be seen that consumer behaviour trends are changing during the pandemic and online shopping for organic fresh produce is no longer an option, in fact, a sustainable option for consumption till the pandemic is contained. Furthermore, the study may provide guidelines for new businesses that want to venture into online distribution channels.

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