

Consumer buying behaviour and purchase intention of organic food: a conceptual framework

Consumer's
behavioural
intention of
organic food

Neeraj Dangi

*Department of Business and Sustainability, TERI School of Advanced Studies,
New Delhi, India*

Sandeep Kumar Gupta

*School of Management and Entrepreneurship, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida,
India, and*

Sapna A. Narula

*School of Management Studies, Nalanda University, Rajgir, India and
Department of Business and Sustainability, TERI School of Advanced Studies,
New Delhi, India*

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to investigate existing research in factors impacting organic food purchase with special reference to eco-labels and identify the relative influence of various determinants.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual framework is proposed of organic food buying behaviour after analysing a sample of 154,072 consumers reported in 91 research studies from 2001–2020. The factors are categorised into four categories on the basis of relatedness. In addition, the factors were analysed based on time, region and national economic status.

Findings – The impact of consumer psychographics, socio-demographic and product-related factor categories were found to be more pronounced compared to supply-related factor category. The results show that among individual factors like health concern, environment concern, knowledge and awareness, eco-labels and price followed by trust in organic food are the most important factors in organic food purchase. The findings suggest that eco-labels increase trust in organic food by reducing information asymmetry in consumers. However, there were differences in perception and factors importance between high-income economies and emerging economies.

Originality/value – The study is unique, as it analyses secondary research based on criteria of high-income economies and emerging economies. The conceptual framework can also be incorporated further into different cognitive models like the theory of planned behaviour.

Keywords Organic food buying behaviour, Eco-labels, Organic food certification, High income economy, Emerging economy

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Pollution and environmental issues, often as a result of economic growth, (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Narula and Desore, 2016) have led to a growing demand for eco-friendly or green products (Teoh and Gaur, 2019; Chaudhary and Bisai, 2018; Narula and Desore, 2016; Desore and Narula, 2018). To fulfil this, organisations and stakeholders are moving towards sustainability to remain competitive by dovetailing their operations and products (Dubey *et al.*, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2018; Song, 2016; Martinez, 2012; Svensson and Wagner, 2015; Ozoliņa and Rošā, 2013; Desore and Narula, 2018; Poddar *et al.*, 2019). Purchase decisions are influenced by social, economic, cultural and other factorial contexts (Joshi and Rahman, 2016). The same has been witnessed in the food industry, where polluting conventional agriculture (Chen *et al.*, 2018) is being replaced with sustainable agricultural practices (Chauhan *et al.*, 2019; Narula, 2009) for producing environment-friendly products like organic food.



Accordingly, the global organic food market witnessed a fivefold increase from 17.9bn USD in 2000 to 114bn USD in 2018 (Schlatter *et al.*, 2020). Though, the market is growing in all regions of the world, yet the demand is concentrated in North America (45.2%) followed by Europe (38.5%) (Schlatter *et al.*, 2020). However, the average per capita expenditure on organic food in the world remains only 12.8 USD (2018) (Schlatter *et al.*, 2020).

Consumers are attracted to organic food because it is perceived to be safe, healthy and environmental-friendly (Tran, 2017; Janssen, 2018; Dangi *et al.*, 2020). Yet often this interest is not translated into a purchase (Schäufele and Hamm, 2018; Sultan *et al.*, 2019; Aitken *et al.*, 2020). This area offers an interesting opportunity for research in light of growing awareness of organic food and relatively low purchase corresponding with it. The research objective of this paper is to determine what are the factors that motivate consumers to purchase organic food?

Different research has stressed that consumer attitudes are linked to buying intention and behaviour (Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014; Schäufele and Hamm, 2018; Sultan *et al.*, 2019) with respect to organic products. Focus in most studies has been on the correlation between corresponding attitude and behaviour for green food choices (Lockie *et al.*, 2004; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005; Tung *et al.*, 2012; Zhou *et al.*, 2013; Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014). However, there are a few issues that need further deliberation, as there are inconsistencies among different categories of factors like socio-demographic, consumer psychographics, product and supply related that impact consumer behaviour, including ethical issues in consumer attitude besides environmental and health issues (Nasir and Karakaya, 2014; Schäufele and Hamm, 2018; Dangi *et al.*, 2020).

This study develops a conceptual framework based on existing research on consumer purchase behaviour for organic foods. Despite the existence of literature in this area, factors leading to organic food consumption behaviour show limited understanding, which implies a need to further, advance the research. Previous studies on existing research on organic food have either focused on particular theory(s) (Scalco *et al.*, 2017) or framework development (Rana and Paul, 2017) or are meta-analytic (Scalco *et al.*, 2017; Massey *et al.*, 2018) in nature. This study provides an overview of various factors associated with organic food consumption and evaluates their relationship among themselves without restricting itself to any theories. In addition, it includes the role of eco-labels (organic food certification labels) which have either been barely covered (Rana and Paul, 2017) or not covered at all (Scalco *et al.*, 2017). Finally, based on analysis, it categorizes the factors and proposes a conceptual framework. Thus, the study enhances the understanding of the existing literature and addresses the aforementioned gaps in organic food buying behaviour.

2. Methodology

The paper is based on data collected through secondary literature sources related to organic food consumption. To accomplish this study, different bibliographic databases such as *Science Direct*, *Google Scholar* and *Web of Science* were searched using pre-defined keywords such as “organic food consumption”, “organic food consumer buying behaviour and intention”, “organic food labelling” published in the last 20 years (i.e., 2001–2020). We identified a large number (<1,135) of potentially relevant publications including papers, reports and other literature. Research on associated areas such as green consumption, fair trade food, etc was not included. Book chapters, reports, thesis and unpublished manuscripts were also excluded. Further shortlisting was done based on careful consideration and selection. Only peer-reviewed journal articles in English were considered. Double entries or studies with basic missing information were excluded. Publications in the last two decades (2001–2020) were included, considering the growing market and popularity of the organic food and the role of Internet technology in increasing awareness, knowledge and facilitating its availability in this time period.

The manuscripts were examined through title and/or abstract and removed, unless it was found relevant to the topic of interest or general approach. All research papers selected were required to evaluate the intention to purchase or consume organic food (either generic or specific). In addition, some studies were added manually by searching within the references of the examined manuscripts obtained by the previous method. Based on the topic and quality screen, not all the examined manuscripts were relevant for the study. Thus, from 255 potential manuscripts, 91 research articles were included in this study. All research papers were empirical (89) except two, one each for conceptual and case study.

Most of the publications considered used primary data except eight that were based on secondary data. The total sample size of all the publications considered was 1,54,072 (primary and secondary data). The mean and mode sample size were 1,711 and 442, respectively. Primary data were mostly collected through survey (77%) whether face-to-face was or online, using questionnaire (91.4%) and interview (9.4%). Focus groups were used by 5.4% of research papers. The most common methods of data analysis were regression (linear, logistic and hierarchical) (32%) and structural equation modelling (SEM) (23%). 9.8% of sources conducted experiments, particularly food choice experiments. 54% of research papers were from high-income economies (HIE) and 46% from emerging economies (EE).

3. Review of literature

The review of the selected publications about the different factors that impact the purchase of organic food is presented below:

3.1 Socio-demographic factors affecting buying behaviour

The role of socio-demographic factors in consumer food choice has been mixed.

3.1.1 Income. Income remains important since regions with less per capita income also see a drop in per capita consumption of organic food [Schlatter et al., \(2020\)](#), as it is expensive ([Gao et al., 2014](#)).

Despite the overwhelming majority of organic food consumption in North America and Europe, the correlation between income and organic food purchase has been varied ([Onozaka and Mcfadden, 2011](#); [Squires et al., 2001](#); [Chen, 2012](#); [Jinghan et al., 2007](#); [Manuchehr, 2016](#)). Segmentation in organic food has been mostly based on lifestyle, as organic food is a speciality food ([Kim et al., 2013](#)).

3.1.2 Education and knowledge. Information is an important attribute for the purchase of any product and that is true for organic food as well. Consumers acquire information from various sources: informed consumers, print and online news media, etc. Also the repeat purchase based on past consumption experience ([Victoris et al., 2016](#); [Thøgersen et al., 2010](#)) is significant. Thus, the need for effective quality or attribute dissemination is important for consumers.

3.1.3 Gender. Most studies in different regions suggest that females have positive attitudes and are more likely to purchase organic food than males ([Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014](#); [Tung et al., 2012](#); [Lea and Worsley, 2005](#); [Krystallis et al., 2008](#); [Onyango et al., 2007](#)), though some have found gender ([Suki, 2013](#); [Manuchehr, 2016](#)) as well as age ([Suki, 2013](#); [Manuchehr, 2016](#)) not impacting purchase.

3.1.4 Age and presence of children in household. Age often along with other factors influences purchase. Socio-demographic factors such as age ([Kim et al., 2013](#); [Singh and Verma, 2017](#); [Lockie et al., 2004](#); [Onozaka and Mcfadden, 2011](#)) as well as the presence of children in the household ([Grubor and Djokic, 2016](#)) are likely to influence consumer attitudes towards organic food and their buying behaviour. The presence of children in households also has a relationship with marital status.

3.1.5 Values and food consumption. Values have a higher impact on positive organic food beliefs than socio-demographic variables ([Lea and Worsley, 2005](#)) since they guide individual behaviour and practices. Different demographic profiles possess different values that are also

likely to have varied food habits, attitude, intentions and behaviour (Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014; Zhou *et al.*, 2013; Chryssohoidis and Krystallis, 2005). Personal values like health, personal security and well-being is generally the strongest case for purchasing organic food (Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014; Zhou *et al.*, 2013; Chen, 2009, 2012; Padel and Foster, 2005).

3.1.6 Culture and ethnics. Citizens across different countries with varying development index could display distinct attitudes, purchase intention and behaviour with respect to organic food (Squires *et al.*, 2001; Zhou *et al.*, 2013). This is important since currently, most of the organic food consumption studies have researched North American or European consumers.

3.2 Product and supply-related factors

3.2.1 Eco-labelling. Eco-labelling schemes provide an environmental snapshot of products to the consumer during purchase process helping them in their eco-friendly choices by (Valor *et al.*, 2013; Andrea Blengini and Shields, 2010; Harris, 2007) increasing transparency.

However, the success of eco-labelling schemes has been mixed. Ability to distinguish between different logos may not lead to their usability in the decision process (Bond *et al.*, 2008). Although, most purchase decisions are made in-store (Feunekes *et al.*, 2008), but a limited time of about half a minute (Peters-Teixeira and Badrie, 2005) and low motivation to read labels while shopping (Valor *et al.*, 2013), especially if they are found too confusing (Peters-Teixeira and Badrie, 2005), may result in superficial processing of information (Feunekes *et al.*, 2008), rather than a more detailed analysis.

Information overload due to the complex format reduces its usability (Pieniak *et al.*, 2007). Perceived optimally relevant information can bring change in attitude and behaviour (Verbeke *et al.*, 2007). Consumer's response to food labels varies with consumers value priorities.

3.2.2 Barriers. Barriers act between consumer information and choice. Barriers such as price (Torres-Ruiz *et al.*, 2018; Mimbashrazgah *et al.*, 2017) and availability (Singh and Verma, 2017; Ergönül and Ergönül, 2015; Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013; Padel and Foster, 2005) have limited organic food consumption. Premium pricing ceases to be a barrier to a great extent if consumers are educated about the reasons and its value (Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013; Krystallis *et al.*, 2006).

In addition, other barriers about certain attributes of organic food like trust deficit in certification (Torres- Ruiz *et al.*, 2018; Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2015) are often not adequately contemplated (Ergönül and Ergönül, 2015; Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002). This increases purchase uncertainty (Klein, 2013; Wu *et al.*, 2011; Tung *et al.*, 2012). As per Jinghan *et al.* (2007), income is not a substantial barrier. Shopping location, knowledge of organic brand and label (Kiesel and Villas-Boas, 2007) and positive beliefs towards organic foods (Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013) are more impactful factors.

3.2.3 Consumer ethnocentrism-origin and traceability. Consumer ethnocentrism can often predict product value (Orth and Firbasova, 2003) and influence purchase intention (Amos *et al.*, 2014; Chen, 2012; Bernabéu *et al.*, 2010).

Food nationalism leads to the perception that food produced within the nation is safer than an imported one (Boys *et al.*, 2014; Gao *et al.*, 2014), as shorter food chains are considered more transparent with better quality food products (Jumba *et al.*, 2012). Also, food safety may not always be related to nationally produced food. Many times products from certain countries are considered safer and less risky, due to higher quality control and traceability (Gao *et al.*, 2014; Knight *et al.*, 2007), influencing their willingness to pay (WTP) premium prices for them. People in different European nations have varied understandings for traceability (Kehagia *et al.*, 2007) and country of origin, owing to low awareness (Pieniak *et al.*, 2007; Verbeke *et al.*, 2007). Higher interest was observed for guarantees and use by dates (Verbeke *et al.*, 2007). Also, formal organic food certification can be supplemented with context-specific quality at the local level to sensitize and promote organic food consumption, especially in emerging markets (Jumba *et al.*, 2012).

4. Conceptual framework and discussion

Factors influencing consumer purchase behaviour can be classified into four categories: demographics, product-related, supply-related and consumer psychographics (Figures 1 and 2). The impact of socio-demographic factors (29.7%), product-related (29.4%) and consumer psychographics (28.7%) was found to be more pronounced compared to supply-related (12.2%) factors. However, the influence of factors across different factor categories should be seen collectively rather than individually. Further, based on the results, the factor categories can be labelled as important (socio-Demographic; consumer psychographics; product-related) and less important (supply-related) depending upon their influence on the consumer buying behaviour. These factor categories with their labels help us to draw a framework (see Figure 4) that could enable the marketers to explore the influence of critical factors on the marketing of organic food.

Health concern, environmental concern, knowledge and awareness, eco-labels (certification) and the price have been found to be the most significant factors that impact the consumer buying behaviour of organic food (Figure 2). The prominence of health concern (10.4%) over the environment (9.5%), social (1.9%) and animal concern (0.5%) establishes that consumers are more influenced by personal factors (health concern) over altruistic factors (environment, social and animal concern). This also indicates that the organic food market is guided by the perceived benefits of organic food as being healthier and eco-friendly in nature. The importance of knowledge and awareness (9.2%) highlights the need among organic consumers to seek reliable, authentic information to reduce information asymmetry. Consumers may gain knowledge about food attributes through informational labelling (Dimara and Skuras, 2005), certifications (Valor *et al.*, 2013; Zhou *et al.*, 2013; Gao *et al.*, 2014), warranties, branding, advertisement and peers. Improving communication and building awareness among consumers about organic food is thus important for the growth of the organic food industry (Lin *et al.*, 2009).

Eco-labels and certification (8.8%) of organic food is one of the important tools to provide an assurance towards these concerns. The role of eco-labels becomes prominent, as consumers tend to seek and demand more information about the quality standards, production process and its ingredients. As consumers are also concerned about food safety (4.4%) due to green washing and food scares, organic food certification attempts to allay such concerns. It increases consumer trust (5.3%) on organic food, as it highlights food's naturalness (2%).

This will also help the organic consumers, as they often perceive organic food is superior in nutrition (Rong-Da Liang (2016) and taste (Cerda *et al.*, 2012; Chrysohoidis, and Krystallis, 2005; Boys *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Lea and Worsley, 2005). Thus, eco-labels promote sustainability, reducing information search costs for consumers. But food labelling should be supplemented with other means of communication like information campaigns (Hoogland *et al.*, 2007).

Trust is majorly based on consumer's knowledge and awareness. The ability to seek process information about food quality would be influenced by the level of buyer education (4.4%). Education (Krystallis *et al.*, 2006; Valor *et al.*, 2013; Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Vehapi and Dolićanin, 2016; Vietoris *et al.*, 2016), motivation (Valor *et al.*, 2013) or other technical skills can determine the ability of a consumer to seek and identify diverse information sources such as food labels, Internet, besides the ability to process this information (Aslihan Nasir and Karakaya, 2014). In this regard, education has been seen to drive sustainable behaviour (Schäfer *et al.*, 2011).

Nevertheless, price (7.8%) could be a limiting factor that may hinder organic food purchase intention into actual purchase. Availability and assortment of organic food (3.9%) appears to be a minor limiting factor, except for light organic consumers, as they may find it as a convenience issue compared to conventional food. In general, consumer psychographics is influenced by socio-demographic factors.

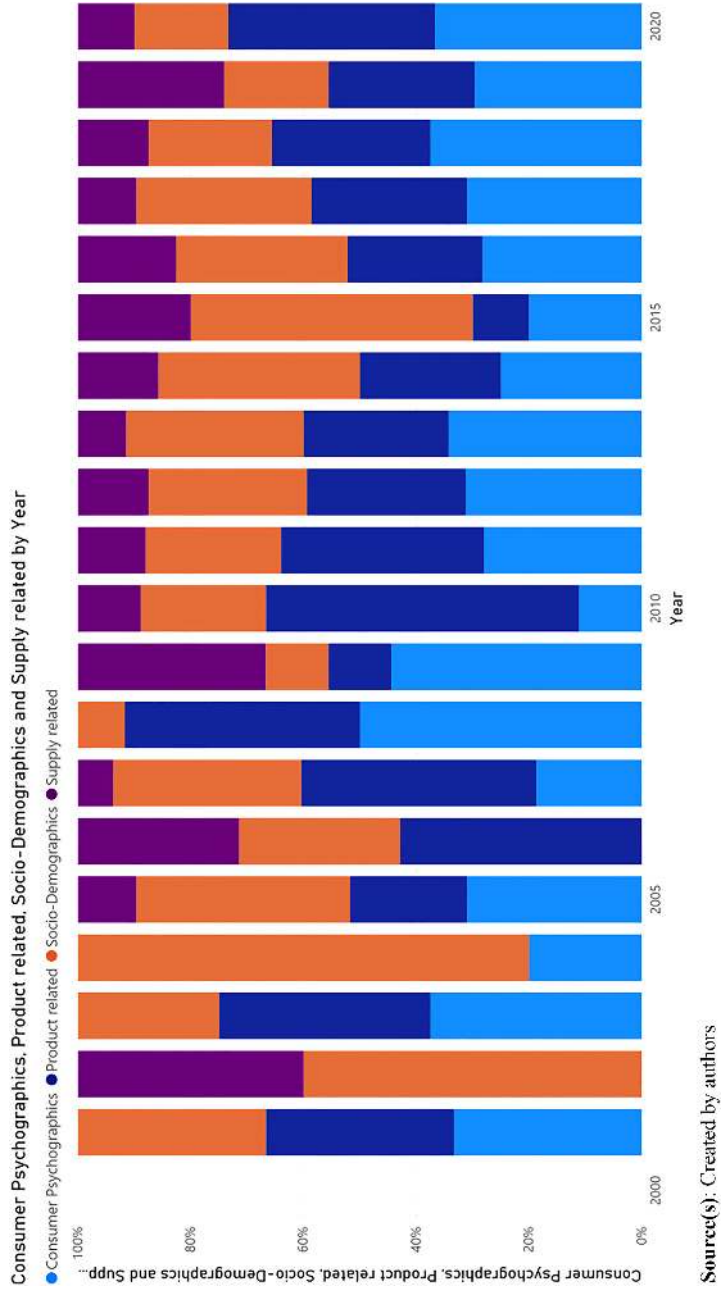


Figure 1. Factor categories across time

Source(s): Created by authors

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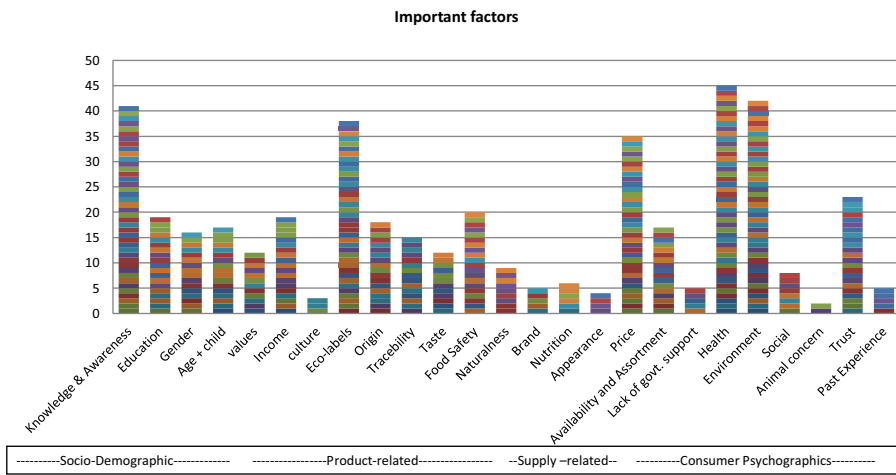


Figure 2.
Important factors determined

Source(s): Created by authors

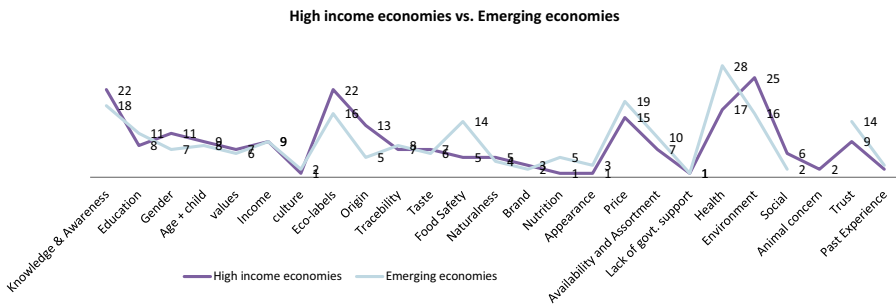
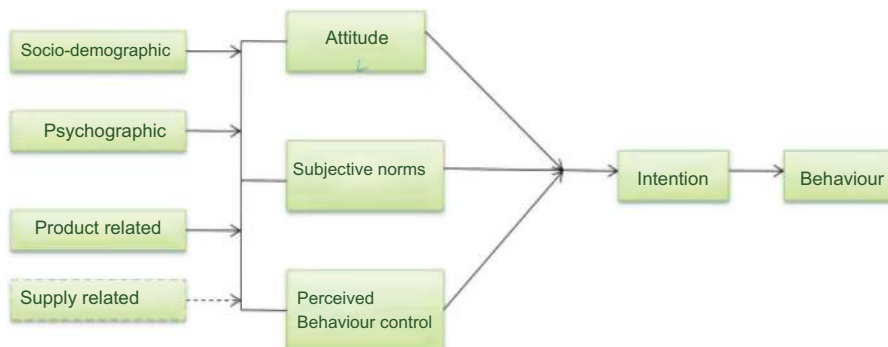


Figure 3.
Factors in high-income economies (HIE) vs. emerging economies (EE)

Source(s): Created by authors



Source(s): Adapted from Ajzen, 2006

Figure 4.
Conceptual framework of organic food buying behaviour

Organic consumers are not homogenous; they can have varied purchase motivations across segments, regions and times. It was observed that the relative influence of categories of factors on organic food consumption vary across time. Although, socio-demographics, product-related and consumer psychographics have remained dominant in the sample over the review period, the relative influence of product-related and consumer psychographics have increased, whereas the socio-demographics is showing a receding trend, especially since 2015 (Figure 1). For better understanding regional differences, we divided them on the basis of continents and further on economic category, i.e. high income economies (HIE) and emerging economies (EE).

Europe (HIE) consumer psychographics and socio-demographics were about 31% each compared to 17% and 53% in Europe (EE). The prime factor in consumer psychographics for Europe (HIE) was environment and for Europe (EE) was health. In fact, environment was not quoted at all in any of studies on Europe (EE). This highlights the influence of values in different nations. As per Zhao and Xu (2013) consumers may exhibit green buying behaviour not because of environmental concern but due to their association to a frugal lifestyle or for ethical reasons. Thus culture-specific contexts have to be considered. Nevertheless, health or environment, both reflect personal values like personal security and well-being. However, there was wide difference in no of studies on Europe (HIE) (32) compared to Europe (EE) (6), making generalization of conclusion limited.

The data were then clustered into two groups: HIE (49 studies) and EE (42 studies) irrespective of region (Figure 3). The parity in number of sources perhaps makes generalization more valid in this case. HIE-based studies contributed 61% for environment and 75% for social concern cumulatively (in psychographics category) than compared to just 39% and 25%, respectively, in emerging economies (EE). Similarly respondents in HIE determined higher importance for eco-labels (58%) and food origin (72%) (of product related category) than compared to 42% and 28%, respectively, among EE respondents. Animal concern was the least important, as it was reported only twice (Stobbelaar *et al.*, 2007 (Netherlands); Laureti and Benedetti, 2018 (Italy)), both belonging to Europe (HIE) region. However, health concern (62%), trust in organic food (61%) (psychographics) and food safety (74%) (product-related) were reported from emerging economies (EE) compared to 38%, 39% and 26%, respectively, in HIE. Traceability, taste and naturalness (product-related) were almost similar in their importance for all consumers. In order to ascertain food safety, consumers refer to expiry dates, country of origin (Narula and Dangi, 2014; Dimara and Skuras, 2005; Bernabéu *et al.*, 2010), freshness (Bond *et al.*, 2008; Gao *et al.*, 2014), traceability (Wu *et al.*, 2011; Choe *et al.*, 2008), local (Onozaka and Mcfadden, 2011) and certification schemes (Klein, 2013). However, ambiguity in food labels regarding origin, traceability and quality can make consumers suspicious (Klein, 2013; Chen, 2012; Lin *et al.*, 2009; Kehagia *et al.*, 2007) by increasing the gap between intention and the actual purchase (Dangi *et al.*, 2020).

Supply-related factors like price (56%) and availability and assortment (59%) were slightly more important in EE compared to 44% and 41%, respectively, in HIE. This shows the importance of cost to consumer especially for people with less purchasing power. Availability would remain a barrier in nascent markets of EE compared to more matured organic food markets of HIE. Limited availability (Bezawada and Pauwels, 2013), lack of a reliable regulatory system and a uniform national label limits consumption (Boys *et al.*, 2014; Lin *et al.*, 2009). Alternatively, improved supply and government support (Baležentis *et al.*, 2019; Koos, 2011) will increase consumer confidence and likely to make eco-labels more trustworthy and facilitate the growth of organic food market (Sønderskov and Daugbjerg, 2011). Harmonising local certification standards with international ones can also reduce confusion and increase acceptance in international markets (Lin *et al.*, 2009).

Role of income (socio-demographic) was similar in both HIE and EE. Although, most found that higher income facilitates more desire to purchase organic food with two exceptions

in HIE. Squires *et al.* (2001) found that low-income consumers in New Zealand are more likely to buy organic food, and Jinghan *et al.* (2007) found little influence of income on purchase decisions in the US. Thus, income remains an important decision-making factor owing to its premium pricing, especially in the developing world.

Importance of knowledge and awareness (55%) and gender (61%) (socio-demographic) was higher in HIE. Age of respondent and presence of children in household (socio-demographic) were almost similar. 11 studies specifically mentioned that females (whether married or not) are more likely buy organic food and more than 50% of them stated the presence of children, especially young ones influences their decision. Further, some studies have found that younger people are more likely to buy organic food (Tung *et al.*, 2012; Grubor and Djokic, 2016; Onyango *et al.*, 2007) whereas in others it is older (Pieniak *et al.*, 2007; Saba and Messina, 2003; Squires *et al.*, 2001) or middle-aged consumers (Tung *et al.*, 2012; Grubor and Djokic, 2016).

5. Theoretical implications

The proposed conceptual framework can be adapted or extended for future research in organic food consumption with existing models like theory of planned behaviour (TPB). The factor categories form the antecedents of the attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control of the TPB.

The findings suggest that high-income economies and emerging economies are more likely to have similarities among themselves, irrespective of regions. This could be due to the presence of more mature organic markets within high income economies compared to those in emerging economies. There was only one research study between HIE and EE (Molinillo *et al.*, 2020), rest of multi-nation studies were within different HIE. This appears to be a novel finding that can be further validated through future research with more data. Further, it should also be explored whether information processing differs across eco-labels or individuals from different social groups, regions and nationalities.

6. Managerial implications

Policymakers and organic food producers /retailers can benefit (Baležentis *et al.*, 2019) by optimising their marketing and promotions accordingly. Regulators in government and organic food interest groups can strengthen the industry by providing incentives for growing and marketing of organic food to increase its supply in the organic food market. Various educational and awareness campaigns should be regularly conducted to increase consumer trust. Simultaneously the government should address the issue of organic food safety and traceability by initiating, maintaining and enforcing pragmatic policies for its promotion and penalising for greenwashing. Marketers in high-income economies should promote the environmental benefits of consuming organic food. Similarly, managers in emerging economies should capitalise on consumers desire to eat healthy food. In addition, by improving consumer's awareness through get together, organic food fairs, farmer's organic markets, advertisements and promotional campaigns issues related to trust, food safety, origin and traceability can also be addressed. Use of social media and subjective influence can accelerate the adoption curve of organic food.

7. Conclusions and limitations

The impact of consumer psychographics, socio-demographic and product-related factor categories are more influential compared to supply-related factor category. The most important individual factors are health concern, environment concern, knowledge & awareness, eco-labels and price followed by trust in organic food consumption. However,

differences in perception and factors importance exist between consumers of high-income economies and emerging economies.

The study is based on limited data from each nation. It also did not get data from all countries. Actual organic food consumption patterns in each country at macro and micro level will differ since food choices are determined by many factors including regulatory environment. Also, the study included both generic organic foods with some specific types of organic food. The findings in this research are aggregated on a study level rather than at an individual level. The study does not take into account individual organic consumer's buying behaviour.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material available online for this article.

Corresponding author

Sapna A. Narula can be contacted at: narulasapna@gmail.com

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