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Consumer Perception and Attitude Influencing the Purchase Intention of Organic Food: A Case Study in the Mekong Delta Region, Vietnam

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Abstract

This research, conducted in the Mekong Delta region, integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the factors influencing consumer attitudes toward organic food. The qualitative phase involved interviews with 6 green consumerism experts in February 2023, refining research concepts for the Vietnamese context. Subsequently, two consumer opinion surveys were conducted, with a preliminary survey involving 60 participants in March 2023, and a formal survey with 300 consumers in Can Tho and An Giang. Out of 248 valid surveys, the study employed multivariate linear regression and hypothesis testing to elucidate relationships between independent and dependent variables. All three independent variables - health concern, quality assurance, and environmental protection - displayed significant positive impacts on consumer attitudes, with health concern exhibiting the strongest influence. Furthermore, attitudes positively affected consumers' intentions to purchase organic food. The results underscore the importance of health-related considerations and quality assurance in shaping consumer attitudes. To leverage these findings, recommendations include health awareness campaigns, reinforcement of quality assurance systems, and creative communication initiatives for environmental protection, fostering a robust green consumer community in the region. This comprehensive approach offers valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and researchers seeking to understand and enhance consumer perceptions of organic food in the Mekong Delta.

Keywords: Perception, attitude, purchase intention, organic food, vietnam.

1. Introduction

In the heart of the Mekong Delta, where the fertile lands weave a tapestry of agriculture and tradition, a profound shift in consumer behavior is underway. This transformation is characterized by an increasing interest in organic food consumption, driven by a global wave of health-conscious and environmentally-aware consumers. As the Mekong Delta plays a pivotal role in Vietnam's agricultural landscape, understanding the factors that influence consumer perceptions and attitudes towards organic food becomes paramount. This case study embarks on an exploration into the intricate dynamics of consumer behavior, specifically examining the interplay between perception, attitude, and purchase intention concerning

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organic food in the unique context of the Mekong Delta. The study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing localized insights into the preferences of consumers in this region, shedding light on the nuanced factors shaping their decisions in the realm of organic food.

The global surge in interest in organic food aligns with a broader societal shift towards healthier and more sustainable lifestyles (Hjelmar, 2011). Consumers are increasingly conscious of the impact of their choices on personal health, ethical considerations, and the environment. This global trend is particularly resonant in the Mekong Delta, where the traditional "rice bowl" is now witnessing a growing appetite for organic alternatives. The transition towards organic food consumption is not merely a reflection of individual choices but also a manifestation of larger societal values and concerns (Hughner et al., 2007). In this regard, the Mekong Delta serves as an intriguing case study to dissect the intricacies of consumer perceptions and attitudes that influence the purchase intention of organic food.

Consumer behavior is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by psychological, social, and cultural factors (Rozin, 2006). In the case of organic food, the interplay between perception and attitude is particularly crucial in shaping purchasing decisions. Research indicates that consumer attitudes towards organic food are often driven by perceptions of health benefits, environmental sustainability, and ethical considerations associated with the production process (Hughner et al., 2007). The Mekong Delta, with its rich cultural traditions and dependence on agriculture, presents a unique context where consumer attitudes towards organic food are likely to be influenced by a confluence of traditional values, environmental awareness, and health consciousness.

Cultural influences on food choices are deeply rooted in societal norms and practices (Rozin, 2006). In the Mekong Delta, where culinary traditions are an integral part of the cultural fabric, understanding how these traditions intersect with the modern trend of organic food consumption is crucial. The region's diverse population may exhibit a spectrum of attitudes, influenced by factors such as regional cuisines, family practices, and social rituals. Exploring the cultural dimensions of consumer behavior towards organic food in the Mekong Delta provides an essential lens through which to comprehend the intricacies of their perceptions and attitudes.

Moreover, the Mekong Delta is not only an agricultural hub but also an ecologically sensitive region facing environmental challenges (MRC, 2019). Issues such as water pollution, soil degradation, and the impact of conventional farming practices on biodiversity are pressing concerns that may influence consumer choices. As consumers become more environmentally conscious globally, understanding how these concerns manifest at the local level in the Mekong Delta is vital. This case study, therefore, seeks to unravel the nexus between consumer perceptions, attitudes, and the environmental considerations that shape the purchase intention of organic food in this unique region.

In summary, this case study aspires to contribute to the scholarly discourse on consumer behavior towards organic food by delving into the distinctive context of the Mekong Delta. By exploring the interplay between perception, attitude, and purchase intention, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the factors that influence the burgeoning interest in organic food consumption within this culturally rich and agriculturally

significant region.

2. Literature Review And Research Model

2.1 Theoretical foundation

Concept of Purchasing Behavior

Drawing from the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), intention is considered the plan or likelihood that an individual will undertake a specific action within a certain context. Intention represents the cognitive aspect of the readiness to perform a particular action and serves as the primary motivator leading to behavior. Consequently, intention stands as a robust tool for predicting behavior. In this context, purchase intention is conceptualized as the plan or likelihood that an individual will buy a specific product or service. Additionally, purchase intention is defined as what individuals think they will buy, signifying the decision-making process reflecting individual behavior based on the product (Samin et al., 2012). Therefore, this study adopts the general perspective that purchase intention is the likelihood of buying a particular product by a customer. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) identified attitude as one of the crucial factors directly influencing purchase intention. Accordingly, attitude is the positive/negative feeling about carrying out a specific behavior, describing an individual's evaluation of the outcome of an action as positive or negative. It is shaped by two factors: (i) the individual's belief about the outcomes of the behavior (belief in the outcomes having certain characteristics), and (ii) the individual's evaluation of these outcomes (value related to the characteristics of the action's outcome). In this study, attitude toward the purchase of organic food is understood as the positive or negative feeling of customers about buying organic food. Hence, several specific concepts are employed in this study: Purchasing organic food is the act of buying organic food by consumers; purchase intention for organic food is the likelihood of customers buying organic food; attitude is the positive/negative feeling about carrying out a specific behavior; factors influencing attitude are elements capable of impacting attitude; the influence of attitude on purchase intention encompasses the direction and extent of attitude's impact on purchase intention.

Organic Agriculture and Organic Food

According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (2008), organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of the soil, ecosystems, and humans. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity, and appropriate cycling of resources, favoring local conditions over the use of harmful inputs. Organic agriculture amalgamates tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the overall environment and encourage equitable relationships, ensuring a high quality of life for all involved. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Vietnam defines organic agriculture as a production system that safeguards the land, ecosystems, and human health. It is based on ecological cycles, biological diversity adaptable to natural conditions, and avoids the use of environmentally harmful factors. This system combines traditional techniques and scientific advancements to benefit the environment, fostering equitable relationships and a balanced life for all entities within the ecosystem. Both definitions converge on the overarching goal of achieving balanced and sustainable development by minimizing pollution from harmful inputs and resolving conflicting interests among stakeholders.

Organic Food Consumers

Characteristics of organic food consumers are crucial considerations as they significantly impact their attitudes and behaviors. Women often emerge as key purchasers of organic products (Dimitri and Dettmann, 2012) and exhibit a heightened awareness of health issues, particularly those related to chemical residues or preservatives (Yin and Chen, 2010). Additionally, younger individuals tend to be more interested in organic food, aligning with their environmental concerns, while older adults lean towards organic purchases more thoughtfully (Magnusson and Hursti, 2001). Educated consumers, with a proclivity for exploring new products, are often associated with organic purchases (Roitner-Schobesberger et al., 2008; Padel and Foster, 2005). Moreover, the presence of children in a household influences the intention to buy organic food (Yiridoe et al., 2005). Mothers, in particular, alter their dietary choices, incorporating more organic products into daily meals for both themselves and their families (Riefer and Hamm, 2008).

Consumer Perception and Attitude

Consumer perception is a cognitive process involving the selection, organization, and interpretation of information to construct a meaningful understanding of the surrounding world (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). External stimuli, such as green marketing initiatives by businesses, significantly impact consumer perceptions regarding the necessity of purchasing organic food. From an individual perspective, demographic factors like age can influence perceptions of organic food, with younger individuals perceiving organic food as an environmentally conscious choice and older adults considering health implications more prominently (Wandel and Bugge, 1997). Perception plays a crucial role in shaping consumer beliefs, attitudes, actions, buying habits, and purchase decisions (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). Beliefs, in turn, are specific recognitions that individuals hold about a particular object or phenomenon, sourced from opinions, knowledge, and faith, with or without emotional undertones (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). Attitude, on the other hand, represents a psychological inclination resulting from an evaluation of an aggregate with varying degrees of favorability, support, or opposition, aligned with values and beliefs (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995). Consumers tend to gravitate towards products and brands they have positive attitudes towards when motivation arises (Kotler and Armstrong, 2017). Aertsens et al. suggest that an individual's attitude towards organic food is constructed based on prominent beliefs related to the characteristics of organic food and personal values (Aertsens et al., 2009). Given that organic food is perceived as a substitute for conventional food, with a higher price and novelty for many consumers, gathering sufficient knowledge and information about the product and supplier before purchasing becomes essential. Product knowledge is vital as it guides consumers in distinguishing the characteristics of organic products from conventional ones and helps in forming a positive attitude and perception of quality towards the product (Gracia and Magistris, 2007). Consumers with good perception of organic food are more likely to choose organically farmed products (Gracia et al., 2010).

2.2 Hypothesis and research model

In alignment with the evolutionary trajectory of global research, alongside the three foundational factors of the TRA model, TPB (namely, attitude - conceptualized as a positive or negative evaluation of the behavior, subjective norm - the social influence perceived to execute or not execute a behavior, perceived behavior control - reflecting the ease or difficulty in performing the behavior), scholars have introduced additional factors tailored to specific research contexts.

However, no study has delved deeply into analyzing the distinct impact of attitude on purchase intention, offering a comprehensive perspective on the indirect factors influencing purchase intention through attitude. Herein lies a set of supplementary factors unearthed from various studies, forming the basis for the research hypotheses proposed by the authors.

In the context of purchasing organic food, Jay Dickieson et al. (2009) identified the influence of two novel factors: health concern and brand trust on consumers' purchase intentions. Although this study does not explicitly address attitude in the relationship between these factors, when examined against the backdrop of the TRA and TPB theories, these two factors have the potential to exert the most significant impact on attitude (compared to the two original factors of subjective norm and perceived behavior control). Consequently, the authors posit Hypothesis 1:

H1: *Health concern positively influences consumers' purchase intention for organic food in the Mekong Delta region through attitude toward organic food.*

Environmental protection encompasses consumers' concern for environmental conservation and animal rights in the production process, ensuring the sustainable development of natural ecosystems (Kushwah et al., 2019; Teng & Lu, 2016). In conventional farming, the use of growth hormones to accelerate animal growth is a common practice. Consumers apprehensive about the potential adverse health effects and ecological imbalance associated with conventionally produced food opt for organic alternatives (Bryla, 2016; Schrank & Running, 2018). Increasing awareness of ecological diversity and animal rights enhances consumers' inclination towards choosing organic food (Hansen et al., 2018). In some cases, consumers willingly opt for organic products to contribute to maintaining natural balance, demonstrating a sense of gratitude (Kushwah et al., 2019). Therefore:

Hypothesis 2: *Environmental protection positively influences consumers' purchase intention for organic food in the Mekong Delta region through attitude toward organic food.*

Quality assurance pertains to consumers' concern for nutritional value, vitamin content, mineral content, chemical-free production processes, and non-genetically modified components of organic food. Adherence to cultivation regulations ensures product quality and safety (Kareklas et al., 2014; Escobar-López et al., 2017). High-quality and safe organic food significantly influences consumers' attitudes (Bryla, 2016). Furthermore, consumers caring about quality for nutritional components and natural content consider these factors crucial in their purchasing decisions (Fleseriu et al., 2020). Ditlevsen et al. (2019) assert that organic food is perceived as health-friendly due to low pesticide levels and high nutritional content. According to previous studies, the nutritional components in organic food stimulate consumer choices (Schrank & Running, 2018). Organic food is perceived to offer high benefits when it maintains freshness and purity (Molinillo et al., 2020). Scholars have observed a considerable impact of quality assurance on promoting consumers' purchase of organic food and their willingness to pay a premium price (Kareklas et al., 2014). Therefore:

Hypothesis 3: *Quality assurance positively influences consumers' purchase intention for organic food in the Mekong Delta region through attitude toward organic food*

Previous studies examining the relationship between attitude and intention have consistently demonstrated that attitude has a direct and often the strongest impact on purchase intention in consumer behavior. Notable studies supporting this relationship include C. Patch et al.

(2005), Christine Mitchell and Elin Ring (2010), and G. Rezai et al. (2012). Therefore, hypothesis 4 is proposed as follows::

H4: *Consumer attitude positively influences consumers' purchase intention for organic food in the Mekong Delta region.*

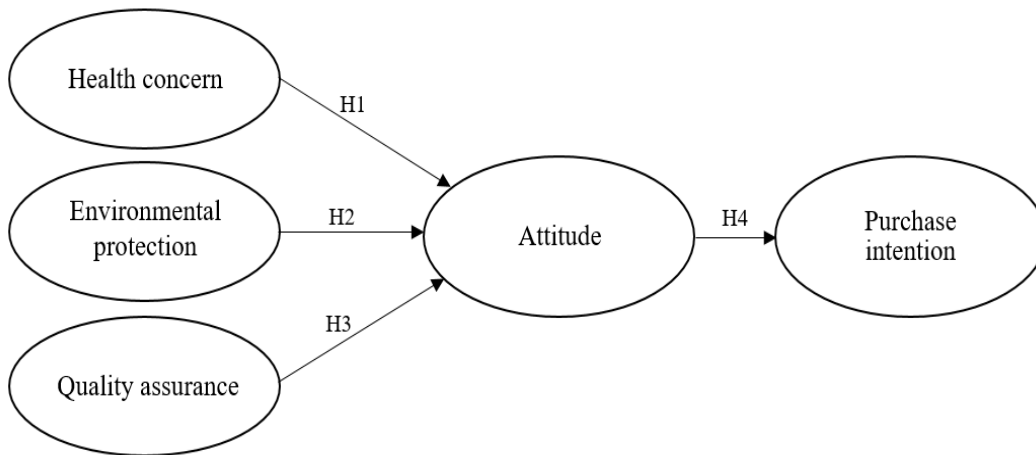


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

3. Research Methods

The study employs measurement scales validated in various contexts by previous research. The research methodology incorporates a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative research phase involved interviews with a panel of 6 experts in green consumerism conducted in February 2023 to refine research concepts and construct a questionnaire tailored to the Vietnamese research context.

The quantitative research phase consisted of two consumer opinion surveys. The preliminary survey, conducted through direct interviews with 60 consumers in March 2023, yielded 43 valid responses. All Cronbach's Alpha values for the concepts ranged from 0.692 to 0.825, surpassing the 0.6 threshold, and the composite reliability coefficients exceeded 0.3. Hence, all measurement scales demonstrated the necessary reliability as suggested by Hair et al. (2010) and were aggregated for the formal study.

The formal study involved direct interviews with 300 consumers in the cities of Can Tho and An Giang, aged 18 to 65, who were familiar with organic food. After excluding inappropriate responses (random selection, incomplete answers, selecting only one response for most questions), 248 valid surveys were analyzed to assess the reliability, validity, and appropriateness of the hypothesis.

4. Research Results

The Cronbach's Alpha values for all conceptual elements in the study fall within the range of 0.683 to 0.837, demonstrating robust internal consistency. Additionally, the composite correlation coefficient for all variables surpasses 0.339, indicative of strong intervariable relationships. These results affirm the essential reliability of all measurement scales, aligning

with the guidelines proposed by Hair and colleagues (2010). The meticulous assessment of internal consistency and correlation coefficients ensures the trustworthiness and stability of the measurement instruments employed in this study, providing a solid foundation for the subsequent analyses and interpretations.

The results of the exploratory factor analysis for the independent variables reveal the extraction of three factors, with all 19 observed variables exhibiting factor loadings greater than 0.5. The variables and factors demonstrate a strong association with each other. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure attains a value of 0.935, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.5, indicating the appropriateness of factor analysis for the actual data. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yields a P-value of 0.000, less than 0.05, confirming the intercorrelation of observed variables within the same factor. Eigenvalues, with a value of 1.183 greater than 1, meet the requirement for representing the variance explained by the identified factors, accounting for 52.603% of the observed variable variation across the three factors.

The exploratory factor analysis for the 'Attitude' variable indicates a KMO value of 0.834, surpassing the recommended threshold, affirming the suitability of factor analysis for the observed data. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity produces a P-value of 0.000, indicating significant intercorrelation among the observed variables within the dependent factor. Eigenvalues, with a value of 1.026 greater than 1, highlight the meaningful summarization of information by the extracted factor. A single factor is extracted from the four observed variables, explaining 55.615% of the observed variable variation, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.5, indicating a robust relationship between the observed and factor variables.

The results of the exploratory factor analysis for the purchase intention variable also demonstrate a KMO value of 0.811, indicating the suitability of factor analysis for the actual data. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yields a P-value of 0.000, confirming significant intercorrelation among the observed variables within the dependent factor. Eigenvalues, with a value of 1.164 greater than 1, ensure the meaningful summarization of information by the extracted factor. A single factor is extracted from the four observed variables, explaining 50.016% of the observed variable variation, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.5, signifying a strong association between the observed and factor variables. These findings satisfy the recommended conditions for factor analysis according to Hair et al. (2010), providing a converged model with explanatory power and facilitating optimal regression analysis. The factors meet the requirements for regression multiplier analysis, ensuring the robustness of the factor analysis results. Overall, the results from the exploratory factor analysis contribute to the credibility, validity, and appropriateness of the proposed hypotheses.

Examining the outcomes of the multivariate linear regression analysis and hypothesis testing reveals compelling insights into the dynamics between independent and dependent variables. All three independent variables exhibit P-values of 0.000, significantly below the 0.01 threshold, indicating the appropriateness of the linear regression model for the broader population. Moreover, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, consistently below 10, affirm the absence of multicollinearity, aligning with methodological recommendations (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1: Results of Factors Influencing Attitude Toward Organic Food

| Factor | Standardized coefficient | P-value | VIF | Result |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------|-------|------------------------------|
| Health concern | 0.294 | 0.000 | 1.000 | Accepted Positive and Strong |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Environmental protection | 0.253 | 0.002 | 1.000 | Accepted Positive and Moderate |
| Quality assurance | 0.187 | 0.000 | 1.000 | Accepted Positive and Moderate |
| Adjusted R square | 53.193 | | | |
| P-value | 0.000 | | | |
| Durbin - Watson | 1.885 | | | |

The study underscores the influential role of each independent variable in shaping consumers' attitudes toward organic food. Notably, 'health concern' emerges as the most potent factor, wielding a substantial impact on attitudes ($\beta = 0.294$). Following closely are 'quality assurance' ($\beta = 0.253$) and 'environmental protection' ($\beta = 0.187$), contributing positively to the formation of consumer attitudes. Furthermore, attitudes themselves exert a positive influence on consumers' purchase intentions for organic food ($\beta = 0.272$).

Table 2: Table 2: Results of the Impact of Attitude on the Purchase Intention of Organic Food among Mekong Delta Consumers

| Factor | Standardized coefficient | P-value | VIF | Result |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Attitude | 0.272 | 0.000 | 1.000 | Accepted Positive and Moderate |
| Adjusted R square | 0.502 | | | |
| P-value | 0.000 | | | |
| Durbin - Watson | 1.894 | | | |

Delving deeper into the findings, it becomes evident that 'health concern' stands out as the factor with the most significant positive influence on the intention to purchase organic food through the mediation of attitudes. Concurrently, 'quality assurance' and 'environmental protection' play pivotal roles in indirectly and positively impacting purchase intentions through the mediation of attitudes.

Given these nuanced results, devising comprehensive strategies to fortify each factor is imperative. For 'health concern,' implementing educational campaigns that spotlight the myriad health benefits associated with organic food consumption could be instrumental. Strengthening 'quality assurance' may involve rigorous promotion of certifications and transparent communication to assure consumers of the product's unblemished quality. Additionally, enhancing 'environmental protection' could encompass initiatives such as eco-friendly packaging and the adoption of sustainable practices throughout the production process.

It is crucial to recognize that these strategies are not mutually exclusive; a holistic approach that integrates aspects of health, quality assurance, and environmental protection is likely to yield synergistic effects. Continuous research endeavors and an open feedback loop with consumers will play a pivotal role in fine-tuning these strategies, ensuring their alignment with evolving consumer preferences and market trends. By addressing these facets comprehensively, businesses and stakeholders can foster a more favorable attitude toward organic food, ultimately influencing and positively shaping consumers' purchase intentions in the organic food market.

5. Conclusion

This study was conducted in two cities, An Giang and Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta region.

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were combined for a comprehensive exploration. The qualitative phase involved interviews with a group of 6 experts in green consumerism in February 2023 to elucidate research concepts and formulate a questionnaire suitable for the Vietnamese context. This phase played a pivotal role in shaping the foundation for the subsequent quantitative phase.

The quantitative phase comprised two consumer opinion surveys. The preliminary survey, conducted in March 2023 with the participation of 60 consumers, was followed by the formal survey involving 300 consumers in the cities of Can Tho and An Giang. After eliminating inappropriate responses, the study continued with 248 valid surveys, contributing to the evaluation of the reliability and validity of the hypothesis.

The results of the multivariate linear regression analysis and hypothesis testing provided profound insights into the relationships between independent and dependent variables. All three independent variables showed P-values below 0.01, emphasizing the suitability of the linear regression model for the overall population. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below 10 confirmed the absence of multicollinearity, aligning with methodological recommendations (Hair et al., 2010). The study underscores the crucial role of each independent variable in shaping consumer attitudes toward organic food. Particularly, health concern emerged as the most powerful factor, exerting the greatest influence on attitudes. Following closely are quality assurance and environmental protection, contributing positively to the formation of consumer attitudes. Moreover, attitudes themselves also positively influence consumers' intentions to purchase organic food.

Based on the research results, several potential solutions and recommendations can be proposed to optimize the positive impact of these factors on consumer behavior. Firstly, to enhance health awareness, educational campaigns and information sessions can be organized to increase consumers' awareness of the benefits of organic food for personal health. Secondly, to enhance the quality assurance factor, certification systems and brands could be strengthened and widely promoted to build long-term trust in the minds of consumers. Finally, in promoting environmental protection awareness, effective and creative communication campaigns are needed to garner support and participation from the community, fostering a robust and positive green consumer community.

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