

STUDY OF ETHICAL PURCHASE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS ORGANIC FOOD

¹Sapna Shanker and ²Dr. Vimi Singh

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor

^{1,2}Home Science,

¹TMBU, Bhagal Pur, Bihar-812001, India

²Shri Arvind Mahila College, Patliputra University, Patna, Bihar-800020, India

Abstract: Consumer ethical behaviour is an outcome of their social and moral values influenced by social norms. The present study investigates the purchasing behaviour of consumers in context with organic food products. Major findings of the research are that consumers have now risen above traditional ways of purchasing and pursue ethical purchase behaviour which includes additional criteria to their purchase behaviour. Health conscious consumers are put in greater effort to buy organic food as they understand the health benefits offered under organic standards. Ethical factors such supporting local produce and reducing carbon footprints and food miles along with combating global warming co-exist with traditional ethical factors like health concern and fair trade. Traditional fair trade principle only promoted pricing principles, but consumers now associate it with factors beyond this, such as favourable working conditions, labour standards and fundamental human rights. Consumers now purchase goods based on their understanding of social and individual responsibility towards society and personal care. This valuable information on consumer decision making can be used by policy makers, marketers and sellers at different levels. Results show that consumers are inclined to buy products that relate with one or more of their manifold ethical factors they relate with. An overall awareness has been noticed among buyers and sellers about the growth of consumption keeping in mind the view the limits and boundaries of the ecological system. Policy interventions may further accelerate better understanding of the consumer market in both developing and developed nations

Keywords - Ethics, Purchase Behaviour, Organic food, Consumer ethical behaviour, health benefits.

I. INTRODUCTION

Significant changes have occurred in consumption models over last few decades, particularly under the food and diet section (Reid et al. 2001). Changing lifestyle has stirred an increased interest in understanding symbolic meanings of food consumption (Colacchio et al., 2008; and Guido, 2009). Once a consumer's basic requirement is fulfilled, they look for food options that would develop their personal and social identity (Marshall 2005). Consumption of organic food (grown under natural conditions, free of toxic fertilisers, pesticides and genetic engineering) has been observed to satisfy a consumers' ethical wants to express care and concern for their family, friends and dear ones as well as their social responsibility towards environment and animal well-being (McEachern and McClean 2002). Ethical consumers can refuse a product if they find anything sceptical or less ethical about the product and rather opt for products that are sourced in an ethical manner. Ethical consumers deeply connect to the idea that their decision directly impacted the society and the environment. They would usually not prefer a product that did not comply with environmental norms, animal welfare or fundamental human rights (Arvola et al. 2008; Magusson et al. 2003; Zanolli and Naspetti 2002). Some examples to support this notion are: buying free-range eggs; refusal of products manufactured under conditions of poor work environment, low paid wages, and involvement of child labour or unethical forced labour. Quick and easy access to information through internet, social media, journals, books and robust advertisements have created well-informed individuals. Consumers have begun to question the authenticity of what they are offered in terms of food. Consumers are now concerned about the overall eco-system within the food-cycle. This attitude has brought retailers to investigate and understand about consumer requirements based upon consumer understanding of a healthy edible food. It is imperative to conduct the study about ethical purchase behaviour of consumers towards organic foods.

II. OBJECTIVE OF RESEARCH

The objective of the present study is to investigate the ethical purchase behaviour of consumers towards organic food products.

III. SOURCE OF DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For analysis the wide literature, research paper regarding ethics and organic food were collected from various referred journals, magazine, newspaper, database of the concerned organization and also collected from the electronic portal of the information which are related to organic food at the Indian and the world scenario. Afterward, a critical analysis was done on the information collected from above mentioned sources to research the ethical factors which lead to purchase of organic food. In this analysis, the depth and exploration of the learning towards the ethical factors which contribute to the organic food purchase..

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

Economists suggest that in general two types of purchase behaviour found in consumers – 'traditional purchase behaviour' and 'ethical purchase behaviour'. As the name suggests, traditional purchase behaviour follows the traditional mindset of a consumer which is normally driven by the idea of buying the cheapest product available in the market provided the alternate article is just as satisfactory as the comparatively costlier item available at the same time (Beardshaw, 1992 cited in Harrison et al., 2005). Sometimes, consumers forego a particular product or a brand-name and choose a 'fair labelled' or an 'eco-friendly' product because they perceive it as ethical and fairly essential (Harrison et al., 2005). This behaviour is called as ethical purchase

behaviour. Ethical consumers make their contribution by applying additional criteria to a certain product and then define the intensity by which they prioritise their own ethical understanding while purchasing a product (Shaw and Clarke, 1998). This type of consumerism is usually associated with morality. Morality is linked to the values and beliefs inculcated in the social system of an individual that aims to distinguish the right from the wrong within one's society (Crane and Matten, 2005). Kavaliauske and Ubartaite (2014) claimed that social and economic problems have vastly influenced the society in developing its ethical behaviour over the last few years. Consumers have begun to look at 'ethical consumption' as a panacea to help society lead a healthy and comfortable life. Thereby, food industries have seriously begun to attune themselves with consumer demand and offer 'ethical consumable items'. As the demand for ethical food items has risen, it has become significant to understand the reason for such ethical behavioural changes and factors influencing them. Noticeable changes in consumer purchasing habits have been closely observed in past few years. Consumers have begun to base their purchases on ethical grounds and choose products that are ethically manufactured. They also prefer brands that closely comply with labour standards, offer workable conditions to their employees and work in accordance with human fundamental rights. Abott et al. 2003 illustrated that consumers increasingly criticised globalisation of agricultural produce and questioned the overall consequences of global grade. They responded to this growing trend with a positive purchase behaviour and product preference for goods with specific ethical standards. A popular example of this is 'fair trade products' that has increased sales in recent years. To verify this fact, some European countries have also achieved double-figures for their fair trade products like coffee and tea and bananas. Ethical consumerism – which is consumption of produce taking social and environmental concern into account (Browne et al, 2000; Carrigan et al., 2004 and Daniel et al., 2008) does not confine its use to the classic "fair trade" principle of supporting farmers in developing countries with more stable prices –but has rather grown to include issues like reducing green house gases, preventing child labour, protection of tropical rainforest and employment of specially-challenged individuals. According to researchers, the whole concept of 'ethical consumerism' arose from the later years of 20th century which has made consumers aware and well informed with the help of availability of information through internet and social media and this directly effects their purchasing decisions (Newholm and Shaw, 2007). Ethical consumers are generally driven by one of the motives – social, political, religious or environmental which pursues them to purchase one item over the other accessible to them (Harrison et al., 2005).

Ethics have played a crucial role in the self-assessment of the organic goods movement from the very start (Cierpka and Schimpf, 2004; Lautermann *et al.* 2005; and Browne et al. 2000). Several publications have indicated that moral beliefs and commitments are relevant purchasing indicators amongst consumers and that 'ethical consumerism' had taken a rising score in the markets world-over (Carrigan *et al.* 2004; and Shaw and Shiu, 2003). Organic good consumers have been widely recognised as ethical, though their reasons are mostly driven by their urge to contribute to the environment (Browne *et al.* 2000). Numerous examples elaborated that organic food consumers were willing to pay a premium price if ethical factors were added to the goods and if they were convincingly communicated to the organic food consumer (Schmid et al., 2004; and Zanolli et al., 2004). Grunert and Juhl (1995) established a strong relationship between consumer preference to buy organic goods and their concern towards environment. This had been further researched by Loureiro et al. (2001) who explained that buyers were more likely to take interest in organic fruits because they were healthy and environment friendly. Durham and Andrade (2005) also suggested that consumer consciousness towards physical well-being and the eco-system were main factors that influenced consumers' preference towards organic foods.

Consumer motive for an ethical food choice was initially studied by Steptoe et al., (1995) in their Food choice questionnaire (FCQ). However, the questionnaire scale was criticised by Lindeman and Vaananen (2000), pointing out that ethical motives were inadequately represented in the questionnaire – and thereafter developed a renewed scale for ethical food choice motives. The scale consisted of three sections: ecological, political and religious motives. As a result of the findings ecological factors came out strong and reflected consumers' genuine concern for environment and animal well-being, while political motive was also a positive indicator suggesting that the country of origin should be more receptive to consumer choices. Religious motive caused minimal influence, however it had a fair chance of change in accordance with the religious attachment of people with food in their country of origin. Within the framework of the understood definition of organic food, ethical issues directly impacted the organic food market. Even though relationship between organic food and consumer attitude has been explored earlier (Squires *et al.*, 2001; Lockie *et al.*, 2004; Dreezens *et al.*, 2005), very little attention had been given to factors like ethical values and food choices. However, Sparks and Shepherd (1992) and Saba and Messina (2003) through their finds have claimed a positive relationship between attitude and intension suggesting that consumers with positive attitude were more likely to intend to purchase organic foods, thereby transmuting attitude into intension. Magnusson et al. (2003) and Honkanen et al. (2006) established that it was ethical motives that explained a group's attitude and intension towards organic food. Ethical motives further resulted into empathy and subsequently formed a positive attitude towards ethical issues which ultimately resulted to preference for ethical consumption (Shaw and Shiu, 2002b). In such cases, ethical motives became associated with consumer identity (Shaw et al.2000), which is a crucial part of an individual's self which again related to a specific behaviour that affected an individual's attitude and intension for organic food products (Shaw & Shiu, 2003, 2002a, 2002b).

According to Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993), ethical consumer behaviour is defined as "a consumer's decision to procure goods based on ethical values and concerns about ethical issues". Crane (2001) identified that the very basis of ethical consumption lied in consumer's conscious and purposive decision to choose a product based on their values and beliefs. Barnett et al. (2005) explained moral obligation as a human image or a part of it and Romu (2009) further emphasised that ethical consumption was a way to exhibit an individual's moral adherence and social obligations. Romu (2009) argued that there was no single definition to "ethical consumption" that has been commonly recognised or accepted by researchers. An ethical product has multiple aspects attached to its brand, such as product safety, environmental impact, labour conditions, fair pricing, discrimination and similar concerns. Ethical researchers have reported different findings and interpretations of their research from the consumer's point still it was found difficult to conclude ethical consumption for a common point.

According to Adams and Rainsborough (2008), ethical consumption is seen a system of belief that protected the environment, promoted fair trade principle, offered favourable working conditions and focused both on human and animal welfare. Ethical goods are often understood as 'organic goods' because of common identification signs. For majority of user's organic food products are equated with social and environmental factors. In a study performed by Makatouni (2012), four broad categories were identified from the consumer's perspective. (Michaelidou, Hassan, 2008; Davis *et al.*, 1995) explained that organic food was identified by factors like - its composition (free of harmful and modified components), production methods (grown under natural conditions with least environmental impact), health and safety features (pesticide and fertiliser free) and social identification (with upper and middle classes). On the basis of several studies it was found that health and safety were the core ethical reasons why people identified themselves with organic food products (Makatouti, 2002; Michaelidou, Hassan, 2008; Kraft, Goodell, 1993).

Tallontire (2001) claimed that the concept of ethical consumption included three major elements - to protect the environment (both nature and animals), to uplift fundamental human rights and to promote fair trade pricing principles and ensure good working conditions at work places. Even though ethical consumption did not have a single particular definition to its use, the study of various scientific reports have suggested that majority of authors explain the use of ethical consumption in a similar ethical understanding. Largely, ethical concern exhibited a strong desire to contribute to the environment - thus reducing all sorts of damaging effects on the environment and society altogether. Other studies view organic food purchase as a division of the larger - "green purchase behaviour" or an "eco-friendly behaviour" (Schlegelmilch *et al.*, 1995). These researches have majorly used the "Norm Activation Theory" (Schwartz, 1977) as a model to research environment friendly behaviour (Stern and Dietz, 1994; Garling *et al.*, 2003; Thøgersen and Olander, 2003). This theory has been central to the ideology that 'altruistic (or pro-environmental)' behaviour is driven by thoughts of moral commitment to act upon-- personal internalised norms. Again these norms get triggered when a consumer is conscious of the overall consequence caused to others through direct or indirect environmental damage. Individual's then ascribe themselves personal responsibility to bring about lucrative change in the environment. This model was further modified by Stern (2000) into a 'Value-belief Norm' theory of environmentalism that combined theories such as - 'Value theory' (Schwartz 1992), Norm Activation theory (Schwartz, 1977) and the New Environmental Paradigm (Dunlap and van Liere, 1978) in a causal chain leading to environment friendly behaviour. The model implied that different set of values, beliefs and norms projected different levels of environmentally significant behaviour. Many studies have established that environmental concerns were based on moral reasonings (Thøgersen, 1999). However, the role of ethical concern has not been found out as a precursor to consumer attitude and intention in context of organic purchase regardless of its contribution towards consumer attitude and intention in a similar context (Shaw & Shiu, 2002a; Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Sparks & Shepherd 1992). Magnusson *et al.* (2003). An individual's personal value is known to form the basis of fundamental psychological variable to understand individual ethical behaviour (Vuylsteke *et al.*, 2002). Several studies have shown that environment or (altruist motivation) is not the ground motivating factor for purchase of organic goods but health concern and comfort (selfish motivations) are prime motivators of such purchases (Henson and Traill, 2000). Several studies have revealed that "supporting small farmers" is the main motivation behind fair trade principle (Sirieix and Codron, 2004) but these motivations do not stand homogeneous across all consumers. Rather 'selfish motivations' like 'food originality, 'exotic taste', 'taste for traditional skills', 'distinct taste or novelty seeking' have been driving motivators for organic food consumer purchase.

Consumers commonly associate and identify organic foods with ethical goods. Their purchase decisions were usually based on their understanding of the goods' environmental values (Browne, 2000). Lindeman and Väänänen (2000) established that the ground reasons to choose organic foods fell into three categories: political, religious and ecological motives. According to them, such motives exhibited a dire concern towards animal well-being and environmental safety. Politically they served the human rights principle in the country of origin and religiously they satisfied a consumer's food acceptability as described by their religion. Research findings showed that environmental concern led the other two values (political and religious) and posed greater influence on consumer purchasing decision while political motives moderately affected the consumer choice and religious motives were only associated with consumers in their country of origin (Lindeman and Väänänen, 2000). Studies have revealed organic food consumption and its purchase to consumer ethics through personal values, moral beliefs and social commitments (Honkanen, 2006; Michaelidou, Hassan, 2010). In the scientific literature (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitello, 1993; Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Vitelli, Singhapakd & Thomas, 2001), it was stressed that certain consumer beliefs and attitudes had a greater impact on consumer behaviour. Based on these outcomes, authors argued that the promotion of ethical values, such as animal welfare and desire to reduce farm exploitation were directly linked to positive attitude towards organic products. Moreover, compared to traditional buyers, customers with organic food choices were more likely to engage in environmental activities such as - buying environment friendly product, demonstrating ethical values, supporting fair trade products and avoiding unethically produced goods available in the market (Honkanen, 2006; McEachern & McClean, 2002; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

An extensive study was performed on a robust sample size of 1000 grocery purchasing Irish consumers to study the decision making process of the buyers in context with ethical issues and to learn the high order triggers that were beyond the classical rational reasons for food purchase. According to this study, organic buyers could be divided into two broad categories: Core Organic Buyers and Peripheral Organic Buyers. Core organic buyers could be further segregated into two groups namely the 'organic believers' and the 'health managers and status seekers'. Organic seekers aligned themselves with group of people with the 'purest organic philosophy' and they bought organic food as an imperative in a well-planned manner. The peripheral buyers were found to be comparatively more spontaneous or immediate and demonstrated a narrower and focused gain for 'health' or 'personal status'. Peripheral organic buyers were largely 'inspirational improvers' who has not purchased organic food in the last one month. Even among the non-organic buyers was a group of segment that open to buying and were 'evolving considerers' who may not be active current buyers but were most likely to buy organically grown foods in the near future. On the basis of purchasing frequency, consumers were also categorised as 'Regular Organic Purchasers' and 'Occasional Organic Purchasers'. The former belonged to the group of people who purchased organic food in the last 1 month while the latter aligned it with people who had purchased organic food in the last 3 to 6 months. The study was performed to understand the consumers' perspective on social and ethical issues (Bord Bia Organic Food Study, 2008). It was assumed that the ethical food market was limited to three issues - Fair trade principle, animal welfare and environment sustainability. However, to explore deeper understanding, a broad

set of ethical issues not just related to food, but which had a potential impact on everyday decision making process of a consumer was also added. These included - Recycling, Global Warming, Genetically Modified Organisms, Animal Welfare, Food Miles, Fair Trade, Organic Food, Local Food, and Carbon Footprints. During the extensive survey, consumers were required to rate these ethical issues on the basis of their concern towards each issue and their personal level of activity to bring about a change in context with that particular issue. As a result recycling was ranked the highest in terms of both ethical concern as well as personal effort put in by consumers to create a difference within the society. The second group of ethical issues that scored high included – ‘organic food’, ‘local food’, and ‘animal welfare’. The third group included ‘carbon footprint’ and ‘fair trade’ but these two issues were addressed with low concern and low level of personal activity by the organic food consumers. Recycling has firmly made its place in the consumer consciousness with widespread use of green bins, recycling options and advertisements stressing on the dire need to reduce waste. Consumers feel assured about doing the right thing and consider recycling as a panacea to counter balance the unproductive activities happening in the environment. It is also regarded as a civic activity demonstrable within the society. Global warming has by far received the highest media attention compared to other ethical issues. Consumers connect to the rapidly increasing problem of climate change and acknowledge the fact that the society together owes to the deteriorating conditions of the environment. Consumers commonly connect with the global warming issue on two grounds – firstly as affecting the third world countries recognised as starving with barren lands and dry deserts and secondly as large factories affecting releasing out toxic gases. Secondly consumers saw big businesses and large factories in remote lands causing global warming. To a fair extent this may be considered true because no noticeable results have been observed as in case of recycling activities.

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In a study conducted by Hamm and Zander (2009), the importance of added ethical attributes for the organic food for consumer’s purchase was examined using the Informational Display Matrix (IDM) and a consumer survey on seven ethical attributes of organic food investigated in five European countries. It was found that ‘animal well-being’, ‘local/regional production, and ‘fair trade principles’ were the most important ethical factors to the consumers and the consumers were ready to pay an extra premium for such products. However on the contrary, findings through direct inquiry- by means of ‘single source approach’ showed different results especially on ‘willingness to pay’ an extra amount with regard to ethical attributes. Respondents also tended answer only to satisfy their social obligations rather than reveal their true preference. Also, despite a growing interest among consumers, ethical values are not well-communicated to the consumers and with rapidly growing competition in the organic food market, marketers tend to loose market shares to producers with strong communication strategies.

Even though a niche, the organic food market is considered an encouraging sector (Hughner et al., 2007). Because of a growing potential, the organic food market has called to attention an increasing interest from all the sides. At one place, organic food selling companies are looking for newer way to increase their sales, while on the other – marketing researchers are diving deep to get a clear understanding of the organic food consumers’ behaviour. A number of studies have been performed to study the primary motives and rationales attached to a consumer’s purchasing decision consumption (Hughner et al., 2007), but up until now, there isn’t yet a scholarly cognition of the multifaceted mechanism of the organic food consumers’ behaviour.

V. CONCLUSION

It is discussed that the idea of ethical consumption has grown over the last few years owing to the increasing knowledge and awareness among masses. Consumers identify ethical consumption with organic food because they relate it with health benefits and its uniqueness in terms of health, taste, uniqueness and authenticity. Health is one of the most common perceptions found among ethical consumers. Also, educated and well-informed consumers greatly relate ethical consumption with environment sustainability as crops and other products remain untouched by toxic elements like pesticides, insecticides and genetically modified organisms which lead to soil degradation and long-term damage of the environment. They also relate ethics to animal welfare due to increasing animal maltreatment. Cruel practices like vivisection (use of animals for experimental surgery), factory farming, injecting growth hormones and animal cruelty has switched sensitivity towards animals. Other ethical reasons include ‘Fair trade’, local produce, food miles and carbon foot-print. Though all these reasons may not exist together for all groups of people, yet there is better understanding in terms of ethics beyond classical reason. Not only consumers but sellers have also delved deeper into fair practices as an outcome of easy and quick information available to consumers through internet and other informative platforms. Earlier, consumers related ethics with ‘Fair Trade’ principles and exhibiting concern for the monetarily robbed farmers of the society. However, consumers now have a broader understanding of consumer ethics in terms of farmers’ working conditions, forced labour, child labour and fundamental rights. Consumers believe that organic food is costlier but they agreed to pay more for the health and social benefits attached to it. However, it may also be observed that ethical consumers did not purchase organic food alone. They bought it in combination with unconventional food products available in the market. This leads one to draw another idea that sellers need to carefully design their marketing strategies so as to convince their potential

customers successfully. Not only this, they should also intend to make their product readily available to consumers at retail outlets. In convincing their consumers, the companies should focus on consumer anxieties which here has been found to be health and environment. Products that are labelled 'organic' and provide health and ecological information have better chances of converting potential customers into permanent ones. For this companies can also provide product information on their website. 'Go green-reduce , recycle and reuse' labelled products have attracted larger audiences because of its recycling activity which in everyday life is demonstrative and satisfies a consumer's social and moral obligation society. Besides sellers should know that there are different types of organic consumers driven by different sets of ethical reasons. These reasons could be anything from product packaging, company image, product information, social media attention and promotional activities undertaken by the company.

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