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Original Article (Qualitative)

Identifying factors affecting the demand for organic products in Iran: A data-based approach

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Abstract

The present study provides a model to identify factors affecting consumer behavior demand for organic products in Iran using a data-based approach, which is in the exploratory research category based on the purpose. The research population includes professionals and experts active in the field of organic products in industry and academia. The sampling method was purposeful and continued until the theoretical saturation stage, in which 14 people were selected. In the technical aspect, the data-based method of the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin is also used. In the present study, using MaxQuda 2024 software to analyze the data obtained from the interviews; 13 causal factors, 3 central components, 14 strategies, 26 underlying factors, 21 intervening factors, and 12 consequences were found from the 89 initial concepts extracted in open coding. The variables of consumer awareness, acute diseases, health-oriented lifestyle and household purchasing power were identified as the most important causal factors. Exploitation of cyberspace and social networks, education, holding exhibitions, festivals and information were introduced as the most practical strategies. Government support, supervisory and inspection organizations, exploitation of approvals and certificates, policies, laws and collective and cultural values were identified as the most effective underlying factors. Consumer trust, macroeconomic situation and product price, inhibitory intervening factors as well as taste, flavor and quality of propelling intervening factors were identified. Mental and physical health of the community, improvement of the generation and prosperity of organic business were the main outcomes predicted.

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In modern marketing, with the approach of providing products in line with the needs and desires of customers and simultaneously considering the health and welfare of the community, it is necessary to take action to examine, analyze and recognize the needs of consumers along with considering ways to maintain the health of the community (Khalaji et al., 2022). The goal of the marketing system is not simply to maximize consumption, provide more choice for the consumer, or provide customer satisfaction; but rather to enhance the quality of life to the highest possible level; and quality of life does not only mean the quantity and quality of goods and services, but also the quality of the environment (Chegini Asli & Saleh Ardestani, 2016). Therefore, it should be considered that healthy and pollution-free products guarantee meeting needs while maintaining human and environmental health and hygiene, and considering that the organic industry has the highest level of environmental and human health maintenance (meysamizade et al., 2023),

Organic agriculture means growing agricultural products and raising livestock without the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified organisms or products, and is often considered a healthier and safer option than conventional products (Pouralijan et al., 2021). Organic food refers to natural foods free of any artificial chemicals, that is, foods that are generally known to be beneficial for individual health, the environment, and society as a whole (Roseira et al., 2022). Organic agriculture can act as an important factor in local development and has an impact on improving the economic conditions of farmers, cultivating social capital and strengthening their connection to the market (Andruszkiewicz & Wierzejski, 2024). In the last decade, environmental and social concerns have increased and consumers have become interested in food products with environmental, health and social characteristics, in other words, sustainable food products (Aqhasafari et al, 2020).

Determining consumer motivations for purchasing organic products and prioritizing these factors can provide a clear and complete picture to planners and policymakers in this sector so that, with a comprehensive understanding of the level of promotion of the structures affecting it, they can have a complete plan to implement the necessary support policies and fully respond to the needs of producers and consumers, so that ultimately the process of producing organic products can be expanded and enter the consumer market through appropriate marketing channels (Hezar Khani et al., 2023). Paying attention to the needs and demands of consumers is the first step to developing the organic products market because understanding consumer behavior and examining the factors affecting it plays a very important role in the success of any economic system (Karbasi & Sheibani, 2022). Attempts to conduct an extensive study are faced with a lack of articles. Understanding the characteristics and behavior of the target market and being aware of the issues that affect business are essential for effective marketing of organic food items (Raksha Shenoy et al., 2024). Therefore, the researcher intends to answer the question: What are the factors affecting the demand for organic products in Iran?

Theoretical Basis

Organic Product Buyer Behavior

Organic product buyer behavior is a set of decisions and reactions of consumers in selecting, purchasing, and using products that are in line with the principles of health, hygiene, and the environment. This behavior is influenced by individual, social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors and reflects consumers' willingness to purchase products that ensure

personal and community health and support sustainable and environmentally friendly production (Safari et al., 2022).

Marketing Mix in Organic Product Buyer Behavior

Marketing mix is a set of organizational tools and actions that companies use to influence consumer decisions and behavior, including product, price, distribution, and advertising. In the context of organic products, the appropriate use of these tools plays an important role in gaining trust, increasing awareness, and strengthening consumer purchasing motivation. Product features, quality, packaging, and health and environmental certification labels are among the factors that influence buyer behavior and make consumers feel confident about the authenticity and value of the product (Hezar Khani et al., 2023).

Andruszkiewicz et al. (2024) conducted a study called “Comparative Analysis of Consumer Behavior of the Younger Generation in Poland and Germany with the Aim of Assessing Consumer Behavior of This Generation in the Context of Organic Food Market Trends”. The results showed that the Covid pandemic and the Ukrainian war have increased social uncertainty and inflation, which has reduced consumers’ purchasing power.

Kamboj et al. (2023) conducted a study called “Motivations for Intention to Buy Organic Food”. This study was conducted on 294 Indian consumers using a questionnaire method. The findings showed that functional value, quality, social norms, consumer innovation, and green trust have the greatest impact on purchase intention.

Research Method

The present study is applicable in terms of purpose, and qualitative in nature, with an exploratory approach, conducted to identify the factors affecting the demand for organic products in Iran. The theoretical framework of the study was formed based on the principles of consumer behavior and theories related to sustainable consumption, and in order to discover the underlying theory, the data-based theory approach with the systematic model of Strauss & Corbin (1998) was used. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were used with 15 academic experts, experts in the agricultural and environmental sectors, as well as activists in the organic products business, including producers, distributors, and consumers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and observing the principle of theoretical saturation.

The interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives and theoretical background review. In the first stage, a list of 6 open-ended questions was designed that covered various aspects related to the demand for organic products. To increase content validity, the questions were provided to three experts in the field of agricultural marketing and consumption management, and necessary amendments were made after receiving feedback.

The interviews were conducted in person and in some cases online, and each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. While adhering to the framework of the questions, it was possible to ask supplementary questions based on the participants' responses to deepen and enrich the data. Before the start of each interview, the objectives of the research were explained to the participants and their informed consent was obtained.

The collected data were analyzed through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. Review by the participants was used to validate the data, and triangulation of sources and the use of expert opinions were used to ensure reliability.

Research Findings

The present study showed that the behavior of buyers of organic products in Iran is influenced by a set of individual, economic, cultural and environmental factors. Education, information,

smart marketing and access to diverse products are the most important strategies affecting consumer willingness. Also, demographic factors, moral values and laws and regulations act as a basis or barrier to the acceptance of these products.

Discussion and Conclusion

Data analysis showed that the behavior of buyers of organic products in Iran is influenced by a set of economic, cognitive, individual and personality and belief factors. In the economic dimension, household purchasing power was identified as a determining component. This finding shows that even if the consumer has a positive attitude or sufficient awareness about the benefits of organic products, financial constraints can prevent purchase. This result is consistent with the results of Safari et al. (2022) and Hasanzehi & Dadres Mokhtari (2021) and confirms the importance of the economic dimension in consumer purchasing behavior.

In the cognitive dimension, consumer awareness and knowledge related to the benefits of organic products had the greatest impact. The findings show that effective information and education increase purchase motivation; this result is consistent with the studies of Kamboj et al. (2023) and Roseira et al. (2022). Also, personal health concerns and beliefs related to a health-oriented lifestyle, similar to the study of Ayaviri-Nina et al. (2022), play an important role in choosing healthy products and show that consumers in Iran also pay special attention to their own and family's health.

Personality and belief factors were also effective. In particular, the influence of family and reference groups was identified as one of the most important components, indicating that social norms and recommendations from reference groups can shape purchasing behavior. This finding is consistent with the results of Roseira et al. (2022) and emphasizes that consumer purchasing behavior is not only influenced by individual factors, but also social and cultural networks play a key role.

Strategies related to education and marketing, such as education through educational centers, the use of cyberspace and social networks, holding exhibitions, and informing through official media, acted as reinforcing factors and helped reduce consumer resistance. This is consistent with the findings of Hezar Khani et al. (2023) and indicates that education and marketing can strengthen consumer motivation and acceptance.

The underlying factors included demographic characteristics (age, gender, family structure), collective and cultural values, health and treatment conditions, and sales and distribution infrastructures. These factors, similar to the findings of Hasanzehi & Dadres Mokhtari (2021) and Safari et al. (2022), show the role of the environment and social context in shaping purchasing behavior. In particular, collective and cultural values indicate the importance of social and cultural contexts in consumer decision-making.