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THE INFLUENCE OF MORAL NORM TOWARD ORGANIC FOOD PURCHASE INTENTION AMONG MALAYSIAN CONSUMERS: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Abstract: *The production of organic food that adheres to sustainable practices has been acknowledged for its contribution to environmental protection. This suggests that consumers' purchase decisions on organic food can be motivated by both health benefits and a sense of responsibility to protect the environment. However, the growth of organic food in Malaysia remains a niche product, despite its known beneficial characteristics. Recognising this situation, this study has utilised the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to develop a conceptual framework for examining the factors that influence Malaysian consumers' purchase intentions regarding organic food. While the TPB consists of three main predictors, this study proposes an extension by integrating a moral norm into the framework that emphasises ethical consideration. This approach is relevant within the context of organic food as it supports environmental sustainability. As such, this highlights the need for further investigation into how moral norm can shape consumers' purchase intentions toward organic food, considering that the organic food market in Malaysia is still developing and is consumed by a relatively small population. To address this, the study proposed a quantitative approach for data collection through a structured questionnaire. SPSS and SmartPLS 4 will be used in this study to analyse descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. By integrating moral norm into the TPB, the study aims to offer insights into consumer behaviour toward sustainable consumption. The findings are anticipated to contribute to both academic and practical perspectives, highlighting the aspect of moral norm and their influence on consumers' purchase intention toward organic food in Malaysia.*

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Introduction

The global population continues to expand and is anticipated by 2050 to reach 9.8 billion (United Nation Population Fund, 2022). This rapid increase has led to efforts to develop more efficient and economical production methods that can ensure human sustainability (Cheng et al., 2020). However, these developments have also raised concerns among people especially on health, safety, and environmental impact (Al-Dawood et al., 2023). This has been demonstrated by the increased use of synthetic chemicals in food production within the agricultural sector (Botinggo et al., 2021).

In response to this concern, organic farming has become the primary choice among stakeholders in their efforts to progress further toward future sustainability (Cheng et al., 2020). This is evident from the global expansion of organic farming, as the area of organic agricultural land in hectares has increased from 11 million to 96.4 million between 2001 and 2022 (Bernal Jurado et al., 2019; Willer et al., 2024). Besides that, organic food has also been recognised as a food product that benefits health and the environment due to its standardised organic farming methods (Ashaolu & Ashaolu, 2020). Subsequently, organic food has emerged as an alternative option for consumers looking for products that are safe to consume and contribute to environmental sustainability.

Nevertheless, Malaysia's organic food market remains inconsistent and rather less significant relative to global trends. For instance, organic agricultural land in Malaysia remained stagnant at 603 hectares since 2014 and peaked at 9,576 hectares in 2018 then dropped to 1,339 hectares in 2022 (Willer et al., 2023, 2024; Willer & Lernoud, 2019). Moreover, researchers have stated that Malaysia's organic food market has remained a niche sector (Abu Seman et al., 2025), with the majority of the food sector being dominated by conventional food products (Omar et al., 2016).

While Malaysian consumers are gradually embracing organic food (Hassan et al., 2015), statistics indicate that only 19% of Malaysians purchase organic food, which is lower compared to neighbouring countries (Rakuten Insight, 2023). This gap is further underlined in a previous study, when researchers indicated that organic food demand in Malaysia continues to be lower than in other nations, despite its potential benefits (Saleki et al., 2019). Consequently, this situation may undermine the expansion of Malaysia's organic food market. This is because the growth of the organic food sector is inconsistent and low consumer purchases of organic food can hinder its development and widespread acceptance among Malaysian consumers.

The situation earlier has illustrated that Malaysia's organic food market is still in the development stage, which aligns with Saleki et al. (2019) recommendation to investigate factors that affect consumers' intention to purchase organic food in developing countries such as Malaysia. Additionally, the market for organic foods has the potential to expand as more people become concerned about environmental sustainability (Dinh et al., 2023). This is because the decision to purchase organic food has always been aligned with environmental concerns since it is produced through environmentally friendly procedures (Le & Nguyen, 2022). Recognising this, the study adapts the Theory of Planned Behaviour and proposes a conceptual framework that extends to the moral norm, which reflects the ethical obligation individuals feel to act in a

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way that benefits not only themselves but also the environment through the purchase of organic food.

Literature Review

Organic Food

Organic food refers to a food product that is processed through an organic agricultural method that uses no artificial pesticides and fertilisers (Muhammad et al., 2023). For organic food to be certified, the production must comply with the regulations that emphasise environmental protection (Suhaimee et al., 2016). The market for organic food products is predominantly comprised of vegetables, fruits, cereals, bread, milk, beverages, and meat, which collectively represent the biggest share in the global market. (Golijan & Dimitrijević, 2018). Besides that, fresh vegetables and fruits which include products within the same subcategories have been ranked as the most popular choices among organic food consumers (Willer & Lernoud, 2019).

Additionally, consumers' preference toward organic food driven by benefits such as health and environmental preservation has also contributed to the growth of the organic food market. Research suggests that customers perceive organic foods as a healthier alternative to conventional products (Ashaolu & Ashaolu, 2020) and choose to purchase them as part of an effort to support environmental protection (Le & Nguyen, 2022). This shift in consumer behaviour toward organic products promotes public health. It also helps mitigate environmental issues, embodying behavioural change driven by a sense of responsibility which influences their intention to purchase organic food.

In Malaysia, the organic food industry has experienced growth driven by consumer concerns about food safety and sustainability (Rezai et al., 2016). However, the sector remains a niche market (Abu Seman et al., 2025; Suhaimee et al., 2016). This is consistent with other studies, which found that organic food represents only a small portion of the overall food market in this country (Aziz et al., 2020). In an effort to enhance the organic food sector, the Department of Agriculture has introduced several initiatives, including the Malaysian Organic Certification Scheme (myOrganic), which has become the only recognised organic food logo in Malaysia (Lian & Rajadurai, 2020). This initiative helps strengthen consumers' belief in organic food and enables them to distinguish between organic and non-organic products in the market.

Moreover, the government also introduced the National Agricultural Policy 2021-2030 (NAP 2.0) that emphasises the development of the national agricultural sector. The policy also highlights the growth of the organic food sector, which aims to enhance accessibility to organic food and expand the use of the myOrganic certification. However, despite efforts to improve the organic food sector, consumer demand for organic food remains lower compared to other countries (Abu Bakar et al., 2021; Jaafar et al., 2024). This highlights the need for further investigation into consumer behaviour on organic food purchases in Malaysia.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is a theory that emphasises how an individual's behaviour is primarily influenced by their intention (Ajzen, 1991). TPB postulated that an individual's actual behaviour is dictated by their intention and is determined by three key predictors. Ajzen (1991) explained that attitude is an individual's positive or negative assessment of a given behaviour. While the author also elaborates that the subjective norm is defined as the impact of one's social circle on whether or not they engage in an activity, whereas perceived behavioural

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control refers to the perception among individuals regarding their capacity to carry out the intended behaviour.

These three key determinants influence behavioural intention and predict actual behaviour, where a favourable attitude, strong social support, and individual confidence in their ability will increase behavioural intention, as shown in Figure 1. It has been explained that the TPB components are crucial to determine intention and predict actual behaviour, offering a robust framework to understand consumer decisions within behavioural research (Ajzen, 2020).

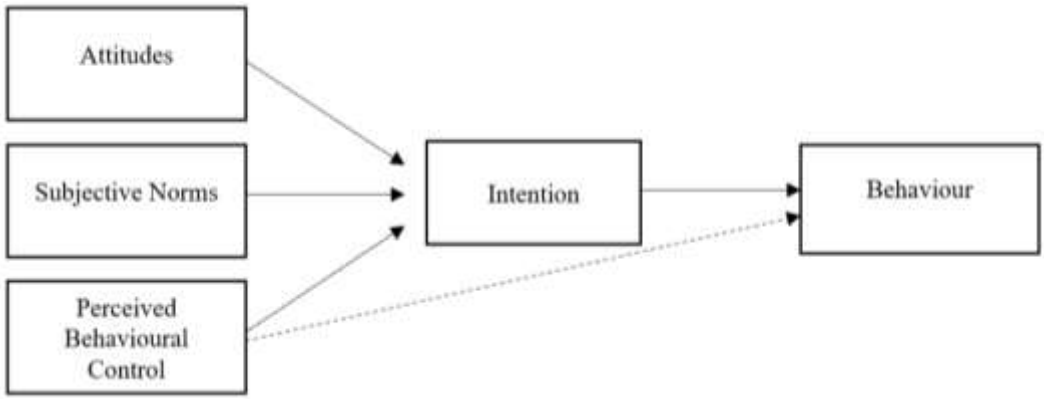

Figure 1: TPB Framework (Ajzen, 1991)

Extending TPB with Moral Norm

Despite TPB having been used in various behavioural studies to predict different types of human behaviour (Ajzen, 2020), scholars argue that its key predictors might not fully account for individual intention in all contexts (Liu et al., 2023; Teo et al., 2016). In response, a few researchers have chosen to extend the theory by integrating additional variables into studies of organic food areas (Carfora et al., 2019; Kabir, 2023; Latip et al., 2023). Moreover, TPB has been noted for its insufficient consideration of the moral aspects toward consumer behaviour (Dowd & Burke, 2013). This limitation highlights TPB lack of moral concern, a dimension that Schwartz (1977) notes as not adequately addressed by the subjective norm. When comparing these variables, subjective norm influences behaviour based on social pressures or expectations from one's social circle. In contrast, moral norm influence behaviour through an individual's ethical values, motivating them to act in accordance with their personal beliefs, regardless of others' opinions.

Subsequently, moral norm can be described as internalised feelings of personal obligation to perform a particular behaviour that reflects an individual's belief whether that behaviour is right or wrong, regardless of people's perception (Schwartz, 1977). This predictor stems from the Norm Activation Model (NAM) that highlights the relationship between moral norm and particular behaviour (Turner et al., 2024). Several past studies have incorporated moral norm into the TPB framework, such as eco-friendly bag usage (Ekasari & Zaini, 2020), the adoption of green products (Liu et al., 2020) and conservation behaviour (Richards et al., 2024). In addition, it has also been explained that including a moral norm in the TPB can increase the predictive power in measuring altruistic behaviour (Manstead, 2000).

Within the context of organic food, the application of moral norm is particularly relevant. This is because organic farming production does not use chemical materials, which can contribute

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to environmental protection. These practices justify the classification of organic food as an ethical choice, particularly given its substantial environmental benefits. In addition, the choice to purchase organic food can also be considered altruistic because individuals choose organic options not solely for personal health benefits but to support broader environmental goals, demonstrating a selfless concern for the greater good (Yadav, 2016). This is supported by Hansmann et al. (2020), who noted the association between organic food consumption and high moral levels due to consumer concern toward the environment.

Based on the earlier discussion, it is clear that while the TPB remains a robust framework for investigating consumer behaviour, the complexity of human behaviour in different situations suggests a need to extend the theory with suitable factors to ensure a better understanding of individual intention to perform a behaviour. Hence, the use of moral norm as an extended variable, as shown in Figure 2, is suitable within the context of Malaysia because organic food choices in this country are driven by concerns about human health, food safety, and environmental sustainability (Jaafar et al., 2024). These concerns reflect the belief that purchasing organic food is not just about personal benefit, but also an act of supporting sustainable agricultural practices that can reduce harm to the environment. Thus, investigating how this norm is integrated into the TPB becomes essential to understand the consumer behaviour among Malaysian consumers.

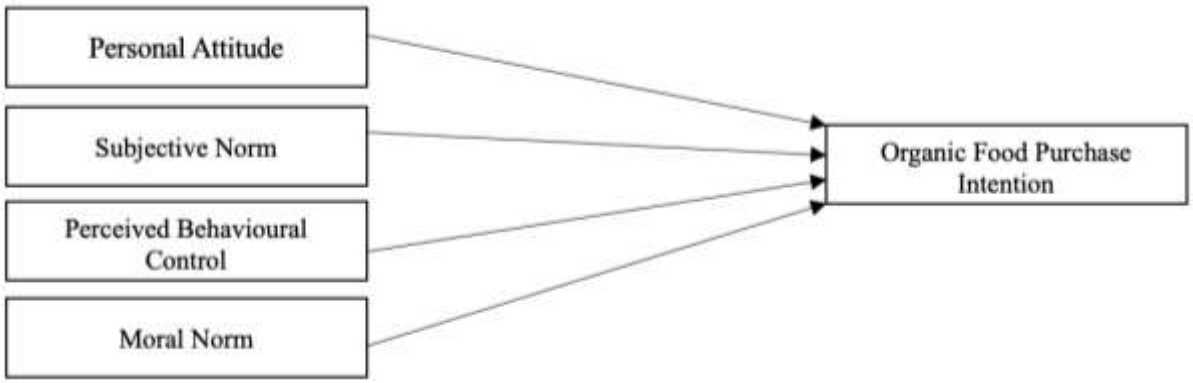

Figure 1 Proposed Research Conceptual Framework

Attitude is an individual determinant that significantly influences intention shaped by specific beliefs and evaluations of anticipated behaviour that are characterised by subjective assessments (Yzer, 2017). Attitude or personal attitude can also be understood as an individual's psychological state of evaluation, which draws favourable and unfavourable judgments (Latip et al., 2020). Several past studies have demonstrated the influence of attitude on consumer purchase intention regarding organic food.

For instance, Latip et al. (2023) investigated the factors that influence an individual's intention to purchase organic food and found that personal attitude emerged as the strongest predictor among the variables tested. This conclusion is also reflected in other studies that employ the TPB, where the results indicate that attitude is the strongest predictor among the TPB variables for organic food purchase intention (Prakash et al., 2023; Teixeira et al., 2022). In Malaysia, Jaafar et al. (2024) reported that attitude significantly influences organic food consumption intention, with consumers' perception of health, food safety and environmental concerns driving this positive association.

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Earlier discussions have shown that attitude influences consumers' intention to purchase organic food. Consumers' evaluations of organic food, whether positive or negative, play a crucial role in forming their purchasing behaviour. Subsequently, when consumers perceive organic food as beneficial and important, they are more likely to develop a favourable attitude toward purchasing it. Building on these insights, this study has proposed the following hypothesis for future research:

H1: Personal attitude positively influences intention to purchase organic food among Malaysian consumers.

Subjective Norm and Organic Food Purchase Intention

Subjective norm refers to an individual's perception of social pressure from their social circle to engage in a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This norm reflects the collective beliefs and expectations within a group or community, influencing individuals to conform to the behaviour deemed appropriate by others (Suryavanshi et al., 2023). The key social circles influencing behaviour can be from friends, family, peer groups, neighbours or relatives. This is supported by a previous study, which found that the subjective norm significantly influences organic food purchase intention, emphasising the role of social influences, such as family or community expectations, on consumers (Asif et al., 2018).

This view is corroborated by Nguyen and Truong (2021), who also found that social circles such as family, friends and reference groups positively influence organic food purchase intention among consumers, highlighting the role of social influence in decision-making processes. Wong and Aini (2017) stated that a positive impact of subjective norm and purchase intention can be attributed to word-of-mouth communication between consumers and their close social circles. This finding is further supported by other studies, which have also demonstrated the significant influence of subjective norm on organic food purchase intention (Cao et al., 2023; Kamboj et al., 2023). Additionally, Saleki et al. (2021) also found that the subjective norm factor influences purchase intention in Malaysia, reinforcing the notion that social circle influences consumers' decisions to purchase organic food.

Subsequently, the influence of social circles on consumer behaviour may lead to a shift in interest towards organic food, emphasising the importance of subjective norm in the decision-making process. Understanding how these social influences affect organic food purchase intention is crucial as consumers seek validation from family, friends and peer groups. Hence, this study has proposed the following hypothesis for future research:

H2: Subjective norm positively influences intention to purchase organic food among Malaysian consumers

Perceived Behavioural Control and Organic Food Purchase Intention

Perceived behavioural control (PBC) denotes an individual's perception of the ease or difficulty of performing a behaviour. This pertains to the degree to which an individual perceives they possess control over the intended behaviour. (Ajzen, 1991). This variable represents how perceived obstacles or facilitators influence an individual's ability to perform a behaviour in a question.

Previous research on organic food has shown that PBC influences individuals' decisions to purchase organic food. For instance, Jaafar et al. (2024) identified a positive correlation

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between PBC and the intention to purchase organic food, suggesting that consumers feel in control and are willing to pay for its benefits despite higher costs. This outcome aligns with other studies, which indicate that consumers intend to purchase organic food to meet their needs despite its higher price compared to conventional food (Auroomooga & Praveen, 2019; Kabir, 2023).

Other studies on organic food in Malaysia also found a positive association between PBC and behavioural intention, suggesting that consumers who feel they have greater control are more likely to intend to purchase organic food (Latip et al., 2023; Saleki et al., 2021). These studies highlight consumers' ability to perform the intended behaviour and how it shapes their perceived control over purchasing decisions. Moreover, Chekima et al. (2023) operationalise PBC within the context of availability, showing that greater availability positively influences consumers' choice to purchase organic food. They also suggested that increased availability not only encourages the consumption of organic food but can also become a barrier if organic food is scarce or difficult to access.

These studies have highlighted how PBC plays an essential role in determining consumers' intention toward organic food purchases, particularly when they feel they have control over their perceived abilities in a particular behaviour. For instance, despite the higher costs of organic food, consumers believe they can overcome these barriers because they perceive themselves as having control over them, which influences their intention to purchase organic food. This sense of control enables consumers to make choices that align with their needs. Based on these discussions, the following hypothesis is proposed for future research:

H3: Perceived behavioural control positively influences intention to purchase organic food among Malaysian consumers

Moral Norm and Organic Food Purchase Intention

Moral norm refers to internalised individual values (Morren & Grinstein, 2016) that instil a sense of moral responsibility that shapes behaviour in specific situations (Setiawan et al., 2021). In the context of behaviour related to moral dimensions, it has been suggested that this norm is often more effective in predicting behaviour (Thøgersen, 2002). It has been suggested that individuals with stronger moral norm perceive a greater obligation toward behaviour (Turner et al., 2024). The norm is derived from the NAM, a model developed by Schwartz (1977) that has been used to predict factors influencing individual behaviour related to altruistic and environmentally friendly behaviour (Onwezen et al., 2013).

This can be seen in many previous studies that developed frameworks revolving around moral norm and found a positive relationship between altruistic and environmentally friendly behaviour. A study by Richards et al. (2024) within the context of altruistic conservation behaviour found a positive relationship between moral norm and behavioural intention. Similar to this study, Turner et al. (2024) investigated coronavirus disease prevention behaviour, which is a form of altruistic behaviour. They found that moral norm significantly influenced individuals to wear masks and practice physical distancing. These findings are consistent with environmentally friendly research, which suggests that moral norm have a positive influence on consumers' intentions to use green products (Tan et al., 2017). Furthermore, empirical studies on organic food have demonstrated that moral norm have a significant impact on consumers' intentions to purchase organic products (Saleki et al., 2019).

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Prior discussions have demonstrated that there is a substantial influence of moral norm and consumer behaviour based on empirical data. Therefore, it can be argued that moral standards may play a significant role in Malaysian consumers' intentions to purchase organic food, reflecting their ethical considerations in making purchasing decisions. Based on these insights, moral norm is expected to significantly influence organic food choices. Hence, this study has proposed the following hypothesis for future research:

H4: Moral norm positively influence intention to purchase organic food among Malaysian consumers

Research Methodology

This study will employ a quantitative method to systematically collect and analyse the data, as it can generate results that represent larger populations. The study will also use a correlational design, as it enables the researcher to understand the relationship between the proposed predictors and consumers' intention to purchase organic food in Malaysia. Additionally, a cross-sectional approach will be used in the study to collect data from respondents because it allows the researchers to understand current consumers' purchase intention. The research setting will also be non-contrived, meaning that the data will be collected in a natural, non-interfering environment, free from the researcher's influence.

Besides that, the study population will focus on consumers aged 18 and above. The rationale for selecting this population is its stable purchasing power and significance as a key buying demographic (Luqman et al., 2020). Furthermore, potential participants in this study must be aware of the existence of organic food in Malaysia's market. This ensures that respondents understand and accurately respond to the survey questions regarding their intention to purchase organic food. Because of this, a purposive sampling technique will be utilised to make sure that the participants selected accurately represent the study's sample. Moreover, following Tabachnick and Fidell (2019) recommendation, a minimum sample size of 300 respondents will be employed to establish the reliability and validity of the measurement.

For the instrument development process, a structured questionnaire will be designed using items adopted and adapted from established empirical studies. As such, each item will undergo face validity assessment through feedback from a small group of target respondents to ensure clarity and understandability. Along with that, content validity will also be performed by experts to confirm that the items accurately represent the intended variables. Since the data collection will be undertaken within the Malaysian population, the instrument utilised in this study will be prepared in both English and Malay languages. On top of that, data will be collected using a self-administered questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to rate the items. A pilot study will also be conducted to assess the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha.

Upon completion of this process, the refined instrument will be deployed to the target population and the collected data will undergo statistical analysis. Descriptive analysis will be conducted using SPSS to examine the characteristics of the data. While inferential analysis will be carried out using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 to test the proposed hypotheses and generate predictions.

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The Importance of Undertaking Further Empirical Research

The study of purchase intention in Malaysia within the context of organic food, particularly from a moral perspective, is still in its early stages, leaving a significant gap in understanding the drivers behind consumer behaviour in this area. While the TPB has been widely applied in various behavioural studies, its main predictors, including personal attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control may not be able to fully capture the influence of the ethical aspects involved in purchasing organic food. In the Malaysian context, where the organic food market remains niche and growth is inconsistent, examining the role of moral norm as an extension of TPB is crucial. This perspective highlights the ethical obligations and environmental concerns that might influence consumer decisions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their purchase intention.

In addition, undertaking such research within this context would be beneficial, as it aligns with the goals of NAP 2.0, including enhancing market access for organic food products, strengthening myOrganic certification in the market and a commitment to environmental sustainability. Since organic food embodies sustainability and environmental protection, this makes moral norm particularly relevant, thereby supporting NAP 2.0. Investigating how consumers view organic food purchases as a reflection of their moral responsibility toward environmental preservation and social well-being can provide crucial insights for key players in the industry. Such insights are essential for developing strategies that enable policymakers and marketers to overcome barriers and enhance consumer engagement in the organic market. Therefore, undertaking further empirical research on this subject is important to fill existing knowledge gaps, enrich theoretical frameworks and support the growth of the organic food sector in Malaysia.

Conclusion

As Malaysia continues to strengthen its agricultural sector, including the organic food industry (Aziz et al., 2020), understanding consumer intention toward organic food is crucial because market growth relies on consumer demand. Since organic food is produced through practices that do not harm the environment, an individual with a higher sense of moral obligation will perceive the purchase of organic food as part of their responsibility to protect the environment. Subsequently, the proposed framework which extends the TPB with moral norm holds significant potential to guide future empirical research. It can provide a foundation for examining how ethical considerations influence organic food purchase intentions. Additionally, its application can provide valuable insights for key industry players on how ethical factors can be leveraged to promote sustainable consumption and support the growth of Malaysia's organic food sector.

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