DOI: https://doi.org/10.62985/j.huit_ojs.vol25.noS1_ICA.256

A REVIEW OF DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TO ORGANIC FOOD

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Received: 2 May 2025; Revised: 25 May 2025; Accepted: 1 June 2025

ABSTRACT

This review explores the psychological, social, and contextual determinants that shape consumer behavior toward organic food, with an emphasis on sustainability and value-driven choices. Beyond traditional behavioral models like the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study incorporates the Means-End Chain (MEC) theory to examine how consumers link product attributes to personal values through perceived consequences. In addition, qualitative techniques such as Free Word Association are considered to capture spontaneous cognitive associations and cultural variations in organic food perceptions. The review synthesizes findings from 35 empirical and theoretical studies, offering strategic insights for marketers, policymakers, and researchers aiming to promote sustainable food consumption. The integration of value-based models and consumer psychology tools enhances our understanding of the deeper motivations behind organic food choices.

Keywords: Organic food, consumer behavior, TPB model, personal values, time perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Organic food refers to agricultural products that are grown and processed without the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), or chemical additives. Governed by strict regulations, organic practices emphasize ecological balance, biodiversity, and soil health, making them distinct from conventional agricultural methods that often prioritize productivity and cost-efficiency over environmental sustainability [1].

Over the past two decades, organic food has shifted from a niche market to a global trend driven by increasing concerns over health, food safety, and environmental degradation. According to the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, the global organic food market surpassed USD 135 billion in 2022, with countries like the United States, Germany, and China leading in consumption. In developing economies such as Vietnam, awareness of organic food is rising steadily as consumers become more informed and environmentally conscious [2].

Despite this upward trend, there is an attitude–behavior gap that many consumers express positive ideas toward organic food but refuse to perform actual purchases [3]. This attitude–behavior gap has sparked research into the deeper drivers of organic food consumption. Understanding these dynamics is vital for developing effective marketing strategies and public policy that align with evolving consumer expectations [4]. Behavioral models, especially TPB [5] have proven useful in explaining the psychological foundations of food-related decisions. Researchers have expanded on TPB by including moral norms, trust, knowledge, and other influencing factors [6-8]. These additions provide a more comprehensive view of consumer motivation.

This paper aims to provide a systematic review of key determinants influencing organic food consumption by synthesizing findings across psychological, social, and situational domains. The goal is to offer deeper insights for researchers, marketers, and policymakers working toward sustainable food systems.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Theoretical framework

The study of organic food consumption behavior has been predominantly guided by behavioral theories, most notably the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) proposed by Ajzen [5]. According to TPB, three key components—attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control—jointly influence a person's behavioral intention, which in turn predicts actual behavior. This framework has been widely used to explain consumers' willingness to buy organic food [8, 9].

Several extensions of TPB have been proposed to enhance its predictive power in the context of ethical and sustainable consumption. Moral norms—defined as a person's perception of ethical obligation—have been found to significantly affect consumers' intentions to purchase organic products [6, 7]. Moreover, personal values, such as health consciousness, environmental concern, and biospheric orientation, are shown to influence both attitudes and purchase intentions [4, 10].

Other theories that complement TPB include:

Rational Choice Theory: emphasizing decision-making based on perceived benefits vs. costs [11]; Value-Belief-Norm Theory: focusing on pro-environmental behavior driven by internalized values [12]; Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) Model: highlighting the role of consumer knowledge and awareness in shaping attitudes. A notable addition to the literature is the role of time perspective—particularly future orientation—in shaping environmentally conscious behavior. Consumers with a long-term outlook are more likely to consider the health and environmental impacts of their consumption decisions [13, 14]. Additionally, the Means-End Chain theory offers a value-based perspective by linking product attributes to personal consequences and core consumer values.

2.1.1. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior, as introduced by Ajzen [5], remains a foundational model for examining consumer decisions, especially in the realm of organic food purchases. This theory asserts that a person's intention to perform a specific behavior is shaped by their attitudes toward the action, the perceived social expectations, and their sense of control over the behavior. Numerous studies validate the relevance of TPB in explaining why individuals opt for organic products, especially when extended with moral and environmental variables that enrich the model's explanatory scope [6, 7].

Recent applications demonstrate how TPB can be effectively integrated with frameworks like Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA), highlighting the impact of belief in product claims and perceived capability on younger demographics in Vietnam [15].

2.1.2. Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

Rational Choice Theory proposes that individuals approach decisions by weighing benefits against costs to maximize personal utility [11]. In the context of organic consumption,

this means evaluating factors like health and environmental benefits relative to higher prices or limited availability. People are more inclined to pay a premium for organic options when they perceive sufficient value. With the rise of digital platforms and consumer tools, this evaluative process has become more informed and accessible.

2.1.3. Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory

According to the Value-Belief-Norm theory [12], environmentally responsible behavior stems from ingrained values, perceptions of ecological conditions, and internalized moral obligations. This theoretical lens is especially pertinent in exploring consumer motivations behind ethical consumption like organic food. Those who strongly identify with biospheric or altruistic values often act in line with sustainability norms, driven more by internal beliefs than by external influences [4, 16].

2.1.4. Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) Model

The KAB model outlines a progression where knowledge shapes attitudes, which in turn drive behavior [17]. In the domain of organic food, this implies that as consumers gain more understanding of the benefits of such products, their inclination to purchase them increases. However, studies reveal that knowledge alone isn't always enough [18]; economic barriers and doubt can still prevent conversion to action. Nevertheless, educational efforts remain key to promoting more sustainable consumption patterns.

2.1.5. Time Perspective Theory

Time Perspective Theory explores how individuals' orientation toward time—past, present, or future—shapes their choices. A forward-thinking perspective, according to Zimbardo & Boyd (1999), promotes behaviors that account for long-term consequences. In sustainable consumption, this means future-focused consumers are more likely to prioritize the health and environmental advantages of organic foods [19]. Empirical findings [13, 14] support this connection, especially among environmentally aware or highly educated groups.

2.1.6. Means-End Chain Theory (MEC)

The Means-End Chain (MEC) theory explains consumer decision-making through a cognitive hierarchy linking product attributes to consequences and ultimately to personal values [20]. In the case of organic food, consumers may associate attributes like "pesticide-free" with outcomes such as "better health," which align with core values like "family well-being" or "environmental care." Laddering interviews are commonly used to uncover these links. The MEC model complements rational and behavioral theories by revealing how deeper value systems guide ethical and health-conscious consumption. Studies in food marketing have applied MEC to show how organic choices reflect both functional benefits and symbolic identity [21].

2.2. Research Methodology

This review employs a qualitative content analysis approach to synthesize findings from existing studies on consumer behavior toward organic food. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2000 and 2023 were systematically identified using databases such as ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Search terms included: "organic food,"

"consumer behavior," "TPB," "sustainable consumption," "environmental attitudes," and recently added terms such as "means-end," "attributes," "values," and "free word association."

Inclusion criteria for selected studies were: (1) Publications in English; (2) Empirical or theoretical focus on determinants of organic food consumption; (3) Use of behavioral models (e.g., TPB, VBN, MEC); (4) Application of qualitative or quantitative methods, including emerging techniques like the Free Word Association (FWA) method.

A total of 30 relevant studies were selected for in-depth analysis. These were reviewed based on their theoretical framework, variables investigated, geographic context, and key insights. Special attention was given to studies utilizing qualitative tools such as laddering interviews and FWA to explore how consumers cognitively associate attributes of organic food with deeper meanings or personal values. FWA, in particular, is useful in cross-cultural contexts to uncover spontaneous associations and priorities that may not surface through structured surveys, offering valuable implications for marketing and policy communication strategies.

Table 1. The summary of organic food consumption behavior 30 studies

No.	Authors (Year)	Behavioral Model/ Variables	Location	Methodology	Key findings
3	Aertsens et al. (2009)	TPB, Value theory-	Belgium	Review	Abstract values, affective attitude, personal norms
4	Vermeir & Verbeke (2006)	VBN	Belgium	Quantitative survey	Values, norms, and perceived efficacy drive intention.
6	Thøgersen (2010)	VBN +Moral norms	Multiple	Cross-country study	Moral obligation is a key determinant of sustainable food choice.
7	Dean et al. (2012)	TPB + moral norms	UK	Quantitative survey	Moral norms significantly influence intentions.
8	Maichum et al. (2016)	Extended TPB	Thailand	Quantitative survey	Attitude, norms, and PBC influence purchase intention.
9	Yadav & Pathak (2016)	Extended TPB	India	Quantitative survey	Attitude, PBC, Environmental concern & environmental knowledge
10	Nguyen, Lobo & Greenland (2016)	TPB	Vietnam	Quantitative survey	Biospheric values encourage, environmental self-identity
11	Grunert & Juhl (1995)	Value theory	45 countries	Quantitative survey	the explanatory power of values for environmental attitude
12	Stern et al. (1999)	VBN	USA	Survey	Values → beliefs → norms → behavior chain validated.
13	Strathman et al. (1994)	Time perspective	USA	Experimental survey	Future orientation predicts pro-environmental action.
14	Johe & Bhullar (2016)	TPB + time perspective	Australia	Quantitative survey	Self-identity, attitude, norm affect organic food behavior.
15	Nguyen et al. (2023)	TPB + MOA	Vietnam	Quantitative survey	Trust and opportunity influence Gen Z behavior.

No.	Authors (Year)	Behavioral Model/ Variables	Location	Methodology	Key findings
16	Wang et al. (2020)	VBN	China	Quantitative survey	Altruism, environmental knowledge & green purchase
17	Schahn & Holzer (1990)	KAB	Germany	Survey	Knowledge affects environmental concern.
18	Hughner et al. (2007)	KAB	USA	Review	Knowledge doesn't always translate to purchase.
19	Zimbardo & Boyd (2015)	Time perspective theory	USA	Psychometric analysis	Five time perspectives; future linked to healthy behavior.
21	Fotopoulos et al. (2003)	Means-End chains	Greece	Laddering interviewing technique	Reveal the way basic motives linked to behavior
22	Tarkiainen & Sundqvist (2005)	Extended TPB	Finland	Quantitative survey	The different role of subjective norms in organic food context
24	Kumar et al. (2023)	TPB	India	Quantitative survey	Significant indirect effect of Health Consciousness, knowledge, Environmental Concern on attitude
25	Chen (2007)	Trust, knowledge	Taiwan	Quantitative survey	Higher trust and knowledge → stronger intention.
26	Duong (2024)	Cultural values + blockchain	Vietnam	Structural modeling	Collectivism, uncertainty avoidance influence organic food behavior.
27	Wang et al. (2023)	Health vs. herd mentality	China	Experimental survey	Herd mentality amplifies health-based motivation.
28	Michaelidou & Hassan (2008)	Health/ethical identity	UK	Quantitative survey	Health consciousness & food ethics affect attitude.
29	Kabir & Islam (2022)	Extended TPB	Bangladesh	Quantitative survey	Attitude & PBC strong; norms weak predictors.
30	Bhutto & Rūtelionė (2024)	Innovation Resistance Theory	Lithuania	Survey	Eco-literacy reduces the effect of psychological resistance.
31	Mishra ^ Manchanda. (2024)	TPB + trust	Nepal	Quantitative survey	Trust affects intention; the mediating role of risk perception and price consciousness
32	Bazhan et al. (2024)	TPB + price/convenience	Iran	Quantitative survey	Perceived price/convenience shape attitude.
33	Lodorfos & Dennis (2008)	TPB + information	UK	Quantitative Survey	Product information reinforces consumer attitudes.
34	Canova et al. (2020)	TPB + trust	Italy	Mixed-method survey	Trust indirectly influences intention via attitude.
35	Dangi et al. (2020)	TPB	India	Review	Individual factors, price & trust are the most factors

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a synthesis of the main determinants influencing consumer behavior toward organic food. Based on the reviewed literature, these determinants are grouped into three broad categories: **psychological factors**, **social and cultural influences**, and **situational or contextual variables**. Recent studies from 2022 to 2024 have been included to ensure up-to-date insights into consumer motivations and barriers.

3.1. Psychological factors

Attitudes and Health Awareness: A favorable attitude remains a dominant predictor of organic food buying intentions across different cultural contexts [8, 9]. Consumers often associate organic foods with improved health, greater food safety, and ecological responsibility [22]. Health-oriented consumers are especially motivated, although social dynamics like herd behavior can also influence their decisions [23].

Perceived Behavioral Control and Convenience: Many consumers face obstacles such as higher prices and limited access, leading to a sense of reduced control over their ability to buy organic products [3]. Convenience has emerged as a key factor in encouraging actual purchases, particularly in emerging markets [24].

Ethical Norms and Environmentalism: Moral obligations and environmental values often reinforce the choice to buy organic products. Consumers guided by ethical considerations and a sense of duty towards sustainability exhibit stronger purchasing intentions [6, 7].

Trust and Information: Trust in organic labels and certifications significantly impacts consumer decisions. Transparent information builds confidence and reduces perceived risk, especially in developing regions [25, 26].

Time Orientation: Future-minded individuals tend to prioritize the long-term health and environmental benefits of their choices. This forward-looking attitude has a strong correlation with organic food consumption [14].

Furthermore, recent applications of the Means-End Chain theory suggest that consumers do not evaluate organic food merely based on rational attitudes or perceived control, but through deeper personal associations between product attributes and their core values [21]. This value-driven decision process explains why some consumers consistently choose organic products despite price or availability constraints. It also supports the importance of designing marketing messages that reflect not just health benefits, but aspirational or ethical identities.

3.2. Social and Cultural factors

Subjective Norms: Subjective norms, or perceived social pressure from friends, family, or society, significantly affect consumer decisions—especially in **collectivist cultures** such as Vietnam [15]. Social influence from trusted others (including influencers and peer groups) can reinforce pro-organic behavior, even in consumers with moderate personal attitudes.

Cultural Values and Herd Mentality: Cultural beliefs and societal values shape consumers' perception of what is natural, clean, and healthy. In Asian cultures, food purity and balance are valued, aligning well with the organic food concept. Wang (2023) further emphasizes that **collectivism** and **uncertainty avoidance** predict organic food consumption [27]. Blockchain and other technologies that enhance traceability can strengthen trust in organic claims

Additionally, **herd mentality**—the tendency to follow the behavior of others—can act as a social shortcut for decision-making, especially when consumers lack detailed product

knowledge [23]. Techniques like Free Word Association have shown that cultural groups often associate organic food with emotionally resonant concepts such as “purity,” “safety,” or “family,” underscoring the symbolic nature of food choice beyond logical reasoning.

3.3. Situational and Contextual factors

Price Sensitivity: The price premium on organic goods remains a significant deterrent. Despite awareness of health and environmental advantages, many consumers are discouraged by the cost difference [3]. However, studies suggest that when consumers perceive value alignment or long-term benefit, they are more willing to absorb the premium [11].

Availability and Accessibility: Limited availability in retail channels and lack of convenient access negatively impact perceived behavioral control [24]. Even consumers with strong intentions may be discouraged if organic products are difficult to locate or not integrated into everyday shopping routines.

Labeling and Certification: Trustworthy certification and clear labeling are essential for overcoming perceived risks [25]. However, inconsistent or poorly regulated certification systems—common in developing countries—often create skepticism. Studies suggest that visual cues, third-party endorsements, and digital traceability (e.g., blockchain) may increase consumer trust [26].

Marketing and Messaging: Messages that connect personal well-being with ethical and environmental values resonate most. Influencer marketing and educational storytelling can be particularly effective with younger audiences [15].

Table 2. Summary of key determinants

Category	Key determinants
Psychological	Attitude, Health Consciousness, Perceived Behavioral Control, Moral Norms, Trust, Time Perspective
Social & Cultural	Subjective Norms, Cultural Values, Herd Mentality
Situational/Contextual	Price Sensitivity, Product Availability, Certification & Labeling, Marketing Strategies

4. CONCLUSION

Grasping the factors that influence consumer decisions around organic food is essential in advancing both sustainable agriculture and ethical consumption. This review synthesizes a wide range of literature—from foundational studies to recent contributions—to highlight the most salient determinants shaping organic purchasing behavior.

From a psychological standpoint, variables such as attitudes, health consciousness, moral considerations, trust in information sources, and time orientation are crucial. These highlight the significant role of individual values, personal responsibility, and forward-looking thinking in consumer choices. While the Theory of Planned Behavior offers a strong explanatory base, integrating additional constructs like moral norms and value-based motivation enhances its applicability.

On the societal and cultural side, elements like subjective norms, collective values, and group-oriented behaviors (e.g., herd mentality) emerge as major influencers, particularly in collectivist cultures. This underscores the importance of leveraging peer influence, cultural symbolism, and shared narratives to shape consumer mindsets.

Contextual constraints—including high price points, limited distribution, and inconsistent certification—continue to limit organic product adoption. Addressing these through reliable certification schemes, wider distribution networks, and educational transparency can help reduce consumer hesitation and increase trust.

Recent research (2022–2024) sheds light on emerging enablers of organic food uptake, such as blockchain-enabled traceability, the growing influence of digital marketing, and the responsiveness of Gen Z to authenticity and transparency. These developments suggest a strategic opportunity to connect with value-driven demographics through digital tools and credible communication. Marketers should develop campaigns that link health and ethical benefits to consumers' self-identity and tap into social norms using influencers. Policymakers should invest in trust-building infrastructure—such as verified labeling and public education—to minimize consumer skepticism. Retailers should prioritize availability and affordability by integrating organic products more widely into mainstream distribution channels.

Future investigations, particularly in emerging economies, should focus on: (1) Examining how digital trust mechanisms (e.g., QR code systems) interact with consumer choices; (2) Tracking long-term alignment between attitudes, intentions, and behavior through longitudinal research; (3) Understanding the role of younger consumer segments, especially Gen Z and millennials, in shaping sustainable food markets.

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TÓM TẮT

TỔNG QUAN CÁC NHÂN TỐ TÁC ĐỘNG ĐẾN HÀNH VI TIÊU DÙNG THỰC PHẨM HỮU CƠ

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Bài viết này tổng quan các yếu tố tâm lý, xã hội và bối cảnh ảnh hưởng đến hành vi tiêu dùng thực phẩm hữu cơ, với trọng tâm là tính bền vững và các lựa chọn dựa trên giá trị cá nhân. Bên cạnh các mô hình hành vi truyền thống như Lý thuyết Hành vi hoạch định (TPB), nghiên cứu này tích hợp lý thuyết Chuỗi phương tiện – Mục đích (Means-End Chain – MEC) để phân tích cách người tiêu dùng liên kết các thuộc tính sản phẩm với các giá trị cá nhân thông qua kết quả cảm nhận. Ngoài ra, các phương pháp định tính như Liên tưởng từ tự do (Free Word Association) cũng được xem xét nhằm nắm bắt các liên tưởng nhận thức tự phát và sự khác biệt văn hóa trong nhận thức về thực phẩm hữu cơ. Bài tổng quan tổng hợp kết quả từ 35 nghiên cứu thực nghiệm và lý thuyết, cung cấp các góc nhìn chiến lược cho nhà tiếp thị, nhà hoạch định chính sách và nhà nghiên cứu trong việc thúc đẩy tiêu dùng thực phẩm bền vững. Việc tích hợp các mô hình dựa trên giá trị và công cụ tâm lý tiêu dùng giúp nâng cao hiểu biết về động lực sâu xa đằng sau hành vi lựa chọn thực phẩm hữu cơ.

Từ khóa: Thực phẩm hữu cơ, hành vi tiêu dùng, mô hình TPB, giá trị cá nhân, quan điểm thời gian.