

The Voice in Choice: Factors that Influence Consumer's Food Related Decisions

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The Voice in Choice: Factors that Influence Consumer's Food Related Decisions.
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Abstract: The aim of this study was to determine which primary factors play a role in consumer's decisions when purchasing organic versus non-organic produce in Vancouver, British Columbia. To achieve this goal, a food choice questionnaire was distributed and completed by 135 randomly selected participants. The questionnaire analyzed consumer's food choices based on ratings of certain factors, while assessing each individual's demographic circumstances, knowledge and perception of the importance and impact of their own actions. As a result, we discovered that *price* was the most influential factor, related to the general public's food decisions. This was followed by *scientific evidence*, *acquired knowledge*, *influence from family and friends* and exposure to *advertisements*. These factors, in order, would make consumer's more likely to purchase organic versus non-organic food- Ultimately, creating a more sustainable, just and viable food system in Vancouver.

Research Question:

What are the primary factors contributing to consumer's decisions when purchasing non-organic versus organic produce in Vancouver?

Hypothesis:

We hypothesize that price will be the most influential factor related to consumer's food choices, followed by their knowledge, influence from family/friends, scientific evidence and advertisement exposure.

Methods:

Participants: 137 participants, from diverse backgrounds in Metro Vancouver, were recruited. However, 2 participants were excluded due to incompleteness of the questionnaire, decreasing our final sample size to 135 participants (N=135; F=82; M=52; Other=1).

Instrumentation and procedure:

In order to determine influential factors, a descriptive survey was considered adequate. Our research team formulated a questionnaire (using ubcsurvey.com), which consisted of 10 questions. These questions were designed to identify which factors (*independent variable*) had the greatest influence on consumer's food choices (*dependent variable*), concerning organic versus non-organic produce. Additionally, it assessed how these people perceive the importance and impact of their own actions, which is a large piece in understanding barriers to pro-environmental behavior and lifestyle choices. Each participant completed the same questionnaire, which was distributed randomly either online or in person. 5 questions, presented in multiple choice style, inquired information about individual's demographic factors (Age, gender, household income range, education and whether they were the main grocery shopper at home). Additionally, participants indicated whether they believed they

purchased organic fruits and vegetables more than non-organic ones. 4 questions measured how often participants purchased organic and non-organic fruits and vegetables (apples, bananas, oranges, carrots, tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries, peppers, potatoes), using a one to five Likert scale. Furthermore, participants rated (on a Likert scale) how important each of the provided factors would be to make them more likely to purchase organic food (price, knowledge, advertisements, influence from family/friends/ scientific evidence that organic food is healthier). Finally, we had participants rate how much they agree with the statements presented. These statements (e.g. "*Buying organic means that my food is pesticide free*") aimed to assess their knowledge and how they perceive the impact of their own actions on the environment. A careful analysis of our data will reveal which factors, in order, drive food choices among the general public. In addition, a correlation analysis will reveal the relationship between certain demographic factors and participant's responses related to our research question.

Results:

After careful data analysis, we can conclude that price is the most influential factor related to consumer's decisions when purchasing non-organic versus organic produce in Vancouver. Based on consumer's responses, (1) "*Lower price for organic food*" would make them more likely to buy organic versus non-organic food. 57 out of 135 participants rated it as a "very important" (VI) factor, and 33 as an "extremely important" (EI) factor. The second most influential factor was (2) "*Scientific evidence organic foods are healthier*" (VI=50;EI=12), followed by (3) "*More knowledge about organic food*" (VI=49;EI=3). (4) "*Influence from family and friends*" came next (VI=31; EI=2); with (5) "*More advertisement for organic food*", being rated as the least influential factor (VI=17; EI=0). Our hypothesis was partially supported- we were accurate in hypothesizing that price is the most influential factor, while advertisement exposure was the least most influential factor. In addition, we discovered a correlation between income and two of the primary factors. Individuals with a higher income were more likely to rate scientific evidence as "very important" or "extremely important", and price as "slightly important" or "quite important"; while individuals with lower income were more likely to rate price as "very important" or "extremely important".

Discussion:

The key driver for eating is of course hunger, but what we choose to eat is not determined solely by physiological or nutritional needs. As our study suggests, other factors influence food choice, including price, scientific evidence, consumer's knowledge, influence from family and friends and advertisement exposure. Based on our evidence, we believe that prices of organic food should be lowered, making these foods more affordable and attainable. In addition, greater scientific evidence/advertising regarding sustainable food choices needs to be presented. Consumers need to be more educated, so that they can make better choices and influence their friends and family to do the same.

Like every study, our experiment consisted of several challenges and limitations. The disadvantage of using a survey was the fact that we could not confirm whether the participant's responses are an accurate depiction of their actions. We suggest that future research consider an alternative method of acquiring data, such as an observational method or interview format. In addition, due to respect for the participant's time and for recruiting purposes, we avoided the use of open ended questions. However, we believe the use of open-ended questions would have provided us with greater knowledge, opposed to multiple choice/Likert scale questions.

Furthermore, our small sample size was detrimental, along with the fact that our research was limited specifically to organic versus non-organic food decisions. We recommend that future research increase sample size and consider testing other aspects related to consumer's food decisions as well (such as shopping locally, animal welfare, etc.). However, in light of these limitations, several strengths prevailed. The use of a simple, short, clear questionnaire made people more willing to participate. In addition, the fact that our questionnaire offers anonymity reduces social pressure and the social desirability bias. Finally, our investigation of the correlation between certain demographic factors and individual responses and the examination of consumer's knowledge and how they perceive the importance and impact of their actions, provided us with extra knowledge to contribute to the field.

Recommendations:

Identifying factors that influence consumer's food related decisions will not only help us recognize what hinders people from making environmentally friendly food decisions- but will also inform us which factors need to be reformed in order to drive more sustainable food choices among the general public. This can be applied to greater populations, such as Vancouver, and smaller populations, such as the public at the University of British Columbia. We recommend that identified factors be adjusted, in order to support and encourage consumers to make smarter food choices. For example, lowering food prices will make organic food more affordable and people will feel more inclined to purchase and consume it. In addition, consumers need to be more informed regarding sustainable food choices. We encourage institutions like UBC to take advantage of their bountiful educational system to set up seminars, classes, distribute pamphlets, and educate and inspire student's to make more sustainable food choices.

Appendix:

Food Choices Questionnaire:

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Food Choices Questionnaire

Please indicate your age range

- 18-25
 26-35
 36-45
 46 and above

Please indicate the gender that you identify as

- Male
 Female
 Other

Please indicate your household income range

- Less than \$20,000
 \$20,000-\$34,000
 \$35,000-\$49,000
 \$50,000-\$74,000
 \$75,000-\$99,000
 More than \$100,000

Please indicate your highest level of education you have achieved

- Highschool
 Postsecondary
 Postgrad

Are you the main grocery shopper in your household?

- Yes

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Generally speaking, do you purchase organic fruits and vegetables more than non-organic ones?

- Yes
 No

Whether you presently buy organic food or not, please indicate how important each of the following factors would be to make you more likely to buy organic?

	Not <u>A</u> t All Important	Slightly Important	Quite Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
Lower price for organic food	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More knowledge about organic food	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More advertisements for organic food	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Influence from friends/family	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scientific evidence organic foods are healthier	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other: _____

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+ How often do you purchase the following fruits or vegetables?

	Never	Rarely (Less than once a month)	<u>Sometimes</u> (At least once per month)	<u>Regularly</u> (At least once per week)
Apples	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bananas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Oranges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Carrots	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tomatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cucumbers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Strawberries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peppers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Potatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

How often do your purchase each of the following organic fruits and vegetables?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Regularly
Organic Apples	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Bananas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Oranges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Carrots	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Tomatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Cucumbers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Strawberries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Peppers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organic Potatoes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Buying organic means I am providing healthier food for my family and I	<input type="radio"/>				
Organic food tastes better than non-organic food	<input type="radio"/>				
Buying organic products means that I support local farmers and agriculture	<input type="radio"/>				
Buying organic food shows that I care about the environment	<input type="radio"/>				
Buying organic means that my food is pesticide free	<input type="radio"/>				
There is little difference between buying organic or non-organic food	<input type="radio"/>				

Link: survey.ubc.ca/s/foodchoicesquestionnaire/