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WHY AND HOW DO CONSUMERS DECIDE ON PURCHASING SUSTAINABLY PRODUCED FOOD?

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Abstract

This research, particularly within the Uzbek setting, studies the factors affecting consumers' choices to purchase sustainably produced food. Organic and environmentally-safe products are more emphasized today given the worsening state of the ecosystem and growing health concerns across the globe. The focus of this research was primarily the young adult population, and the methodology used was an online survey which was designed to cover all regions and cities of Uzbekistan. Responses were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in order to assess demographic patterns, driving forces, and barriers in the consumption of sustainable food. The findings indicate that while taste, freshness, and health are the most prominent in driving consumer behavior, actual concern for the environment plays a far more minor role. Price and availability emerged as the two primary barriers, and in more qualitative terms, they reflected the global 'attitude-behavior gap' that has been widely researched. Findings also indicate that shoppers concentrate on the unprocessed organic items. While spending on dairy, fruits, and vegetables, the more apparent health benefits are more apparent, but the processed organic items are still the least popular. Social approval holds less weight than other motivations. Despite this cultural difference, the study finds the rest of the data is aligned with other global research. The paper concludes by stating that the accessible prices, the developed availability, and the strong consumer trust on the labeling of sustainably produced foods should all be present in the aimed Uzbekistan's food market.

Introduction

Sustainably produced food has become a focus in consumer markets due to persistent factors, including environmental degradation and food safety, leading to human health issues. In recent years, research has increasingly focused on the significance of understanding consumer decision-making for sustainable food systems. For policymakers, marketers, and firms, this knowledge becomes paramount in developing strategies to encourage sustainable agriculture and responsible consumption.

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On the global scale, consumers identify organic or green foods with improved health, safety, and taste, and associate such food products with reduced harm to the environment (site this). However, despite these positive perceptions, sustainable food adoption remains volatile. Among the reasons for this is that adoption is hindered by high expense, limited accessibility, and doubt regarding the validity of sustainable labels, and thus resulting in the so-called "attitude-behavior gap." Moser, A. K., & Peschel, A. O. (2024). The gap is the discrepancy between consumers' positive attitudes towards sustainable products and purchase behavior.

While most of what has been researched about sustainable consumption has been in Western settings, relatively little is known about how such dynamics work in countries like Uzbekistan. Being an emerging market country with a growing youth population, Uzbekistan is a particularly fascinating case when it comes to research into the consumer motivations and limits. Young consumers, for example, are increasingly exposed to international sustainability discourses, but their choices as consumers can be underpinned by cultural, economic, and structural dynamics that are divergent from those of developed economies.

Literature review

The issues of personal well-being, ethical consumption, and ecological issues have intensified attention on food produced in a sustainable fashion. Consumers have started to place more focus on the impacts of ethical consumption on personal health and the environment. Policy and regulatory authorities, marketing experts, and business practitioners are all stakeholders in sustainable food systems who need to have a systematic understanding of the negative ramifications of different types of consumption. To further understand how sustainable food production is entering the global society, we must look at motivations, various barriers, the role of social identity, trustworthiness, labeling, and furthering awareness of sustainable ‘footprints' in daily products from popular companies.

Motivators

When choosing sustainably produced food, health and environmental concerns are the primary motivators. Studies indicate that consumers believe foods labeled as organic or eco-friendly are safer, tastier, and more nutritious; these qualities are associated with their chemical-free origins (Suciu et al., 2019; Petrescu et al., 2019). While these customers may be motivated by values like environmentalism, research shows that animal farms are killing 17,000 Americans each year with air pollution Moser, A. K., & Peschel, A. O. (2024). Meanwhile, many sustainable-focused eaters are concerned with animal welfare, where we see mass use of factory farming in conditions with crowded and packed cages, leading

to conditions and outbreaks like we saw the Bird Flu in the USA in 2024-2025 Smith, J. D., & Lee, R. P. (2025)

Due to the current conditions, consumers will often see these products through the lens of personal well-being, so they encompass both social and individual benefits (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017; Khan & Mohsin, 2015; Wagner Mainardes et al., 2019).

There has been significant research on consumption-value theories that highlight various value dimensions that affect sustainable food choices, beyond individual benefits. Buying organic food is positively linked to functional value (health and safety), social value (approval or prestige), emotional value (satisfaction from making ethical choices), conditional value (situational incentives), and epistemic value (curiosity and novelty) (Khan & Mohsin, 2015). Importantly, people who choose sustainable products are more likely to follow their environmental values if they have a strong environmental identity and see themselves as environmentally conscious (Reinders & Bartels, 2015; Onel, 2016; Golob et al., 2018).

Barriers

Many consumers encounter barriers that limit their purchasing behavior, even with clear benefits outlined earlier (Rana & Paul, 2017; Pham et al., 2018; Suciu et al., 2019). Such barriers include higher prices, limited availability, and unclear certifications and labels. First, sustainable foods usually have noticeable price premiums that affect price-conscious consumers. This cost barrier often causes the well-known attitude-behavior gap. Next, Limited availability is another barrier; in some areas, sustainable products may be hard to find or only available at specialized stores (Rana & Paul, 2017; Pham et al., 2018). Finally, if consumers do not understand or feel confident in certifications and labels, even those who want to support sustainable products may hesitate to make a purchase (Petrescu et al., 2017; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). In sum, pricecost, limited availability, and confusion about information all play a role in the gap between what people intend to do and what they actually do. Policy changes like better access, subsidies, or educational campaigns that aim to help consumers often focus on closing this gap. Currently, we see countries in Europe experimenting with shifting farm subsidies away from traditional animal farming and implementing new taxes on raising cows due to their high impact. Meanwhile, countries are investing in campaigns and planning to continue pushing sustainable options into the public eye.

Factors shaping sustainable behavior

Social norms and identity have been proven as important factors in increasing sustainable behavior. Consumers do not make purchasing decisions alone. Research shows that consumers are more likely to buy green foods when their

social circles value sustainability (Peattie, 2010; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). This influence grows due to the social benefits of eco-friendly choices, such as peer recognition or status. Social media and other platforms can enhance these effects. Visible eco-friendly choices can reinforce norms and encourage more people to adopt them, especially in collectivist cultures (Gupta & Ogden, 2009; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). Taken togetherIn conclusion, identity and social norms are powerful motivators that can lead consumers to make sustainable decisions through social reinforcement.

Another relationship that affects consumers is the relationship between buyers and brands. Trust in the legitimacy of sustainable products is a vital factor affecting consumer behavior (Petrescu et al., 2017; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Ricci et al., 2018). Customers rely on certifications and labels to assess product quality since many green attributes are qualities they cannot verify after consuming the product. Reliable labels, like the EU's "Euro Leaf" emblem, often boost consumers' purchasing intentions by clarifying product claims (Petrescu et al., 2017; Brantsæter et al., 2017). However, unclear or unfamiliar labels can damage trust, and different countries and regions might use their own local labeling system, which is unknown when products are exported. Consumers often struggle to understand label claims or doubt their accuracy, creating hesitation to act. A solid reputation or strong branding can help retail brands establish trust and encourage repeat purchases, which are vital for long-term commitment (Reinders & Bartels, 2017; Konuk, 2018). To maintain customer trust, education and transparency (such as explaining certificatio requirements) remain crucial.

Broader sustainability effects

Research also looks at the larger logistical and environmental effects of sustainable food systems, along with personal preferences. Organic farms often need more land because of lower yields, which raises concerns about efficiency and adaptability, even though they might use fewer chemicals and improve biodiversity (Treu et al., 2017; Brantsæter et al., 2017).

Looking at the kinds of food we consume and changing our habits and traditions, and encouraging more expiration in plant-based cooking.

The University of Oxford found that not eating meat and dairy products can reduce a person’s carbon footprint by up to 73% due to the high amounts of feces and chemicals that are needed for the factory farming, which creates mass amounts of water and air pollutants Vegconomist. (2023, September 11). According to a new study, a vegan diet is the “single biggest measure” that can be taken to reduce environmental pollution. If all people worldwide were to stop eating meat products, the area of land used for global agriculture could be reduced by around

75%.Vegan diet massively cuts environmental damage, study shows Detailed analysis finds plant diets lead to 75% less climate-heating emissions, water pollution and land use than meat-rich ones Carrington, D. (2023, July 20)

https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/20/vegan-diet-cuts-environmental-damage-climate-heating-emissions-study

Lab-grown meat offers the potential for substantial environmental benefits, with studies suggesting reductions of 90-99% in land and water use, and up to 92-96% less greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution compared to conventional beef. These figures vary by study and species, with reductions being less significant when compared to conventional chicken and pork, and with some analyses pointing to a larger energy footprint than traditional methods. The reduction in pollution from farming comes from eliminating the substantial waste generated by livestock, which contaminates waterways and contributes to eutrophication. However, reducing waste and changing eating habits could help close these productivity gaps (Seufert et al., 2012; Müller et al., 2017).

Additionally, research shows that strong consumer demand can lead to more environmentally friendly production methods. Sustainable consumption, which reflects personal values, has the power to influence market norms and supply chains over time.

Methodology

This research utilizes a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. Firstly, an online survey was conducted to gather information on consumer decision-making regarding sustainably produced food. It was conducted from 25th September to 3rd of August. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, aiming to yield numerical data on demographics, purchasing behavior, frequency, and product choices, as well as qualitative insights into personal motivations and perceived barriers.

The participants were primarily young adults, as they represent an active demographic in sustainability debates. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, gender, income bracket, residence, and education level, alongside their purchasing habits and attitudes toward organic food. Open-ended responses and “own option” choices were included to allow participants to share personal perspectives, thus providing richer qualitative data to complement the quantitative findings.

Meanwhile, qualitative answers were analyzed using a thematic approach, with recurring ideas grouped under common categories such as price sensitivity, health motivations, and availability. This methodological combination ensures that both measurable patterns and underlying attitudes are considered in understanding how and why consumers choose sustainably produced food.

Results and Discussion

Result

The survey on sustainably produced food was conducted in Uzbekistan, covering participants from different cities and regions. The findings reveal important insights into demographic patterns, consumer behavior, and motivations related to organic food purchasing.

The age distribution of participants shows that the vast majority (95%) are between 16 and 25 years old, while only 5% fall into the 26–35 age group. This indicates that sustainable food consumption is primarily a concern among younger generations. Gender results reveal that 61.9% of participants are male and 38.1% female.

When analyzing monthly family income, 25% of participants reported incomes above 20 million UZS, followed by 25% earning between 12 and 16 million UZS, 20% between 8 and 12 million UZS, 10% between 16 and 20 million UZS, and 10% between 2 and 5 million UZS. These results suggest that participants come from diverse financial backgrounds, though higher-income families are somewhat more represented.

In terms of residence, 45% of participants live in urban areas, 30% in rural areas, and 25% in suburban areas. Educational background indicates that 45% of participants are high school students, 30% have completed high school, 20% hold a university degree, and 5% attended college.

Regarding consumption, 90.5% of respondents reported purchasing organic food, while 9.5% said they do not. Those who do not purchase cited higher prices (100%) and lack of interest in experimenting (100%) as barriers. Among those who do purchase organic products, the most common choices were dairy products (100%), fruits (94.7%), and vegetables (84.2%). Meat (84.2%), drinks (57.9%), desserts (47.4%), and snacks (42.1%) were selected less frequently.

In terms of duration, 78.9% of consumers reported buying organic food for more than three years, while 21.1% had done so for one to three years. Frequency of purchase shows that 52.6% buy once a week, 42.1% two to three times per week, and 5.3% more than three times weekly.

Motivations for purchasing include freshness, quality, and taste (94.7%), health concerns (73.7%), personal values (68.4%), social approval (31.6%), curiosity or occasion (26.3%), promotional prices (26.3%), environmental awareness (21.1%), and brand trust (5.3%). This highlights that individual benefits outweigh collective or environmental concerns.

When asked what would motivate them to buy more organic food, participants identified lower prices (78.9%) and greater availability (73.7%) as the strongest factors. Other motivators included clearer labels with better information (36.8%), emotional satisfaction from eco-choices (31.6%), better quality (5.3%), and necessity (5.3%).

Finally, in terms of purchasing channels, supermarkets (84.2%) and farmer's markets (73.7%) were the most common sources, while online shopping was used by only 5.3% of participants.

Discussion

The findings from the survey provide strong evidence of how consumer motivations and barriers align with existing literature on sustainable food consumption, while also highlighting certain deviations. We can explore the data collected through various factors discussed above.

Current Barriers

Barriers to sustainable consumption in the survey also align with literature. High prices were universally reported by non-buyers, consistent with studies highlighting affordability as one of the strongest obstacles to sustainable food adoption (Magnusson et al., 2001). Similarly, limited availability was recognized by respondents as a major challenge, echoing research pointing to unequal access between urban and rural populations (Hughner et al., 2007). Interestingly, lack of interest in experimenting was also noted by all non-buyers, suggesting that beyond cost, cultural food preferences and reluctance to deviate from traditional diets also play an important role.

Factors Shaping Sustainable Behavior

The survey reveals that health and taste, rather than ecological concerns, remain the leading drivers. This supports studies that argue that while sustainability values are important, personal benefits such as safety, nutrition, and quality are the primary motivators (Petrescu et al., 2017).

The role of social approval and curiosity was less significant in the survey results compared to what the literature often emphasizes about social norms and identity shaping behavior. While studies suggest that collectivist cultures and peer

recognition can strongly drive sustainable purchasing, the relatively low percentage of respondents citing social approval (31.6%) or curiosity (26.3%) indicates that in this sample, consumers perceive sustainable food primarily as a personal lifestyle choice rather than a socially driven one. This nuance may reflect cultural or generational differences in how social pressure interacts with consumption.

Sustainability Impacts

A notable point is the discrepancy between environmental awareness and actual purchasing. Only 21.1% of respondents cited environmental concern as their motivation, despite literature identifying environmental values as a central driver (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). This suggests a gap between awareness of environmental issues and actual consumer decision-making, often termed the "attitude-behavior gap." Instead, consumers in this survey were more motivated by taste, freshness, and health, demonstrating how personal values frequently outweigh broader ecological goals.

Current Consumer Behavior

The products that people buy most often, such as dairy, fruits, and vegetables, show how consumers see the health benefits of organic items. This matches studies that say foods consumed in their natural state are viewed as healthier and safer if they are organic. On the other hand, the lower demand for snacks, desserts, and drinks suggests that processed organic items are not a priority. This could be due to their higher prices or doubts about their value.

Most consumers buy sustainable products once or a few times a week, which shows steady but not overly frequent engagement. This moderate frequency mirrors literature suggesting that organic consumption remains supplementary rather than dominant in many households' food practices (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008).

Implications, Research Limitations and Suggestions for future actions for betterment in Uzbekistan.

Finally, solutions highlighted by participants—lower prices and better availability—are directly consistent with academic findings on improving sustainable food adoption. Literature argues that addressing affordability and ensuring wider distribution channels are critical to expanding organic consumption. However, the survey adds nuance by showing that clearer labeling and emotional satisfaction also matter, though to a lesser degree. This supports the

notion that while structural solutions (price, access) are essential, psychological and informational improvements (trust in labeling, feeling good about eco-choices) also play a role.

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