

The Moderating Role of Conformity on Purchase Intention of Organic Food: A Conceptual Paper Using Stimulus-Organism-Response Model

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Abstract

This study explores the factors related to Chinese people's decision-making behaviour in purchasing organic food. This study uses the "stimulus-organic-response" (S-O-R) model as the underpinning theory to establish the conceptual framework. The literature review shows that brand image and organic labels are objective stimuli for Chinese organic food consumers. Customer perceived values (functional, emotional, social) are significantly represented as organism, and purchase intention is a response in the S-O-R model. Conformity is proposed as a moderator that affects the relationship between customer perceived values and purchase intention. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing a deeper understanding of organic food purchase intention among consumers in China by applying the S-O-R model and adding conformity as a moderator. It also offers solutions to the Chinese organic food suppliers to increase organic food sales and expand the organic food market in China.

Keywords: Chinese organic food consumers, S-O-R model, perceived functional value, perceived emotional value, perceived social value, conformity, brand image, organic labelling, consumer purchase intention

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, consumer food choices have noticed a noticeable change. The global demand for organic food has been growing steadily. Despite the excellent momentum of the organic food industry, it still encounters some obstacles. According to a study by Chekima et al. (2019), conventional foods dominate the global consumer food sector. The organic food

market in Asian countries will show the fastest expansion rate, surpassing North American and European countries. However, there is a lack of academic investigations on consumer purchasing intention in Asian countries (Wibowo et al., 2022). The Chinese government has widely conducted publicity and education activities on organic food consumption. Due to the government's vigorous publicity, consumers have become increasingly aware of "organic" (Helga et al., 2022). Therefore, studying organic food consumer behaviour in emerging countries is an important research topic, and this study will enable stakeholders to understand the characteristics that encourage Chinese consumers to purchase organic food.

A positive brand image may influence customer attitudes and decisions. Previous studies have shown that brand image directly affects customers' purchasing intentions. Organic food label information has a significant impact on consumer perceptions and behaviours. The more information on the label, the more likely consumers are to purchase (Aitken et al., 2020). Organic labels can change consumer behaviour by encouraging more people to buy organic foods (Lee et al., 2019). Conformity is essential for marketing products and services, especially in enhancing purchase intention. A study by Princes and Manurung (2020) provided empirical evidence that consumer conformity is influenced by social comparison, image-related considerations, and strategic complementarity, which can significantly affect an individual's desire to buy. Many studies have shown that customer conformity can significantly enhance purchase intention (Princes and Manurung, 2020). This social influence can affect a person's awareness, opinions, and attitudes. Consumer purchasing behaviour and loyalty may be affected by conformity (Gonçalves et al., 2020).

This study aims to identify the factors influencing the willingness to purchase organic food in China using the S-O-R framework. It makes significant contributions by exploring a new context, providing unique results, and developing a new model while addressing the shortcomings previously highlighted. This study has important implications for pragmatic managers in the food industry to understand customer behaviour and enhance decision-making to meet consumer demand for organic food. In addition, this study explores issues related to organic food consumption using Chinese consumers as a sample population. The findings of this study will provide a valuable resource for local and international food company managers to enhance their decision-making and policymaking processes in the Chinese food market. Therefore, this study has important practical implications for researchers, organic producers, retailers, and policymakers as it addresses a valuable gap in the factors influencing the willingness to purchase organic food in China. The remainder of this paper will further explore the literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, and research implications.

2. Review of Existing Literature and Development of a Conceptual Framework

2.1 The S-O-R Model

The SOR model is designed to replicate various stimuli and behaviours associated with human senses, nervous systems, and psychological processes. According to Arif et al. (2020),

the application of the S-O-R theory in the examination of consumer behaviour includes classifying external influences on consumers as stimuli (S), internal processes that influence the results as organisms (O), and the resulting behaviours as responses (R). Based on the previous analysis, this study adopts the SOR theory as a theoretical framework, which has also been considered a viable framework for explaining consumer purchase intention in earlier studies. Therefore, this study supports the usefulness of the SOR model in understanding people's internal and behavioural responses to external stimuli.

2.2 The Theory of Consumer Values

In academia, consumer value was first proposed in the 1990s. Since then, a lot of research has been done on this concept. Almost all marketing activities include consumer values (Sheth, 2020). TCV is a coherent model that integrates variables from multiple consumer values, such as the inference of consumer choice as a function of various consumer values (Mohd Suki et al., 2022). According to consumer values theory, consumer choice is a function of multiple consumer values independent of each other. It can contribute differently to the choice situation, including functional, emotional, social, conditional, and cognitive values. Conditional values are considered less important because they are defined as specific instances of other value types. Many consumer behaviour studies have ignored conditional values (Tanrikulu, 2021). At the same time, research conducted by Kushwah et al. (2019) demonstrated that conditional values negatively affect the decision-making process of customers who choose organic food. In addition, Majeed et al. (2022) pointed out that cognitive value also undermines the purchase intention of organic food consumers. Cognitive and conditional values hurt consumers' choice behaviour (Majeed et al., 2022). Therefore, this study emphasizes three variables: perceived functional value, perceived emotional value, and perceived social value.

2.3 The Relationship between Brand Image and Consumer Perceived Values

In organic food, functional value refers to the practical value experienced by customers when making choices that lead to valuable results, including quality, availability, environmental and health advantages, and safety. Since organic food has a credit characteristic, consumers cannot evaluate its food safety based on its characteristics. Therefore, choosing a reputable brand has become essential for consumers when purchasing organic food (Yu et al., 2021). Yu et al. (2021) pointed out that organic food brand image significantly affects consumer behaviour, especially perceived value, loyalty, and word of mouth. Watanabe et al. (2020) studied consumers' motivation to purchase organic food and found that emotional value positively impacts consumers' purchase intention. Customers who purchase organic food believe it protects the environment and promotes physical health, which may have positive emotional value (Tandon et al., 2020). Many researchers, including Widyastuti et al. (2019), found a positive relationship between environmental protection and brand image and were interested in the potential of increasing consumer purchase intention, promoting ecological sustainability, and gaining competitive advantages from a good brand image. According to

previous research, social values in the context of organic food are also related to customers' self-image and utilitarian reasons (Truong et al., 2021). In this case, people prefer brands that enhance their self-image or status rather than brands that are compatible with their current image (Gaustad et al., 2019). When consumers' consumption is consistent with their self-image and the image of relevant social groups that also buy organic food, they are more likely to buy organic food. Based on the above research, the following propositions are proposed:

P1a: Brand image positively influences perceived functional value.

P1b: Brand image positively influences perceived emotional value.

P1c: Brand image positively influences perceived social value.

2.4 The Connection between Organic Labelling and Consumer Perceived Values

Organic labels positively impact consumers' judgments of food quality, health and food safety, environmental friendliness, willingness to purchase, and willingness to pay (Nie et al., 2022). Customers often rely on third-party certifications such as organic labels to identify the organic ingredients of food and help them maintain a healthy lifestyle. Therefore, organic labels may be seen as a symbol influencing consumers' utilitarian purchasing behaviour (Liang and Lim, 2020). According to Gassler et al. (2019), organic labels help customers understand the quality of organic food. Ruppenthal (2023) found that emotions may affect the purchase decision of organic products: organic labels affect explicit and implicit emotional attitudes. The label is important in marketing because the symbol conveys emotional meaning. When purchasing organic products, it is necessary to rely on labels and certificates.

Interestingly, Tandon et al. (2020) regard organic food as a customer social value perception source. Through group interviews, the researchers found that eating organic food can symbolize a person's social identity or build a social reputation. Because building a good reputation when engaging in these actions indicates that one has resources such as money, time, and expertise, which can ultimately enhance one's status in the group, the desire for social status is an essential determinant of prosocial and pro-environmental behaviour (Wan and Du, 2022). Based on the above research, the following propositions are proposed:

P2a: Organic labelling positively influences perceived functional value.

P2b: Organic labelling positively influences perceived emotional value.

P2c: Organic labelling positively influences perceived social value.

2.5 The Relationship between Perceived Functional Value and Purchase Intention

Functional value is generated by the economic and practical usefulness that customers gain during the purchase process and is a critical factor in how consumers determine attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours (Roh et al., 2022). In other words, customers perceive the

functional value of a particular product. Consumers are shifting from conventional to organic foods due to the demand for healthy products. This is further supported by Testa et al. (2019), who found that customers' attitudes toward organic foods are influenced by their level of health knowledge. When customers are aware of these benefits, they use organic foods more and thus perceive a more substantial practical value. Watanabe et al. (2020) studied the relationship between purchase intention and the quality of organic foods, such as those related to functional value. The study's results illustrate the importance of the practical aspects of such products by revealing a significant positive correlation between functional value and purchase intention. In the same field, Ballco and Gracia (2022) emphasized the importance of health-related qualities and pointed out that customers' preference for organic foods is mainly influenced by taste. In addition, Molinillo et al. (2020) investigated the motivations of Brazilian and Spanish millennials to buy organic foods. The results showed that the purchase frequency was influenced by health awareness of functional value. Based on the above research, the following proposition is proposed:

P3: Perceived functional value positively influences consumer purchase intention

2.6 The Relationship between Perceived Emotional Value and Purchase Intention

The advantage brought by the ability of a good or service to evoke feelings and emotions in consumers is called emotional value (Sheth, 2020). Organic food meets both requirements. The pleasure and satisfaction consumers feel when using a product or receiving a service is the source of emotional value (Tanrikulu, 2021). When consuming organic food, customers often believe they are helping protect the environment, which gives them emotional value (Tan et al., 2022). Organic food has little adverse impact on the environment. Therefore, customers are believed to feel satisfaction and emotional value by consuming organic food (Akbar et al., 2019). Because consumers' willingness to buy is affected by emotional value (Tanrikulu, 2021), on the other hand, emotional value comes from the stronger feelings that organic food may evoke due to its appeal to nature, environmental protection and sustainability (Powell et al., 2019). Customers believe that by purchasing natural foods, they are improving social and human conditions. Customers also feel what they do is morally right and beneficial to society. The emotional appeal of using organic food increases the emotional appeal to consumers. This fosters an environmentally conscious civic consciousness in consumers' minds. This is consistent with other research results (Powell et al., 2019). Based on the above research, the following proposition is proposed:

P4: Perceived emotional value positively influences consumer purchase intention.

2.7 The Relationship between Perceived Social Value and Purchase Intention

The ability of a good or service to enhance or improve a customer's social self-concept confers social value to it (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Sheth (2020) argues that "the perceived utility gained from association with one or more specific social groups, measured by the product's association with various reference consumer groups," is the meaning of

social value. Self-image is related to social value because interactions between customers, employees, and other customers can significantly influence people's purchasing feelings (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020). Consumers are motivated by social values because they choose products based on the opinions of specific social groups. However, previous research on organic foods has shown that the critical components of social value are product recommendations, consumer self-identity, consumer reputation, and contact with the surrounding society (Liang and Lim, 2020). Social value has been tested in a wide range of areas. Dangi et al. (2020) studied the factors influencing Indian consumers' decisions to buy organic food, including social norms and subjective standards that affect purchase intentions. Therefore, social pressure may affect consumers' purchase intentions or decisions. Social anxiety or peer pressure often affects people's purchasing behaviour (Yang et al., 2021). Therefore, consumers' social value from eating organic food is reflected (Tanrikulu, 2021). Based on the above research, the following proposition is proposed:

P5: Perceived social value positively influences consumer purchase intention.

2.8 The Moderating Effect of Conformity on the Relationship between Consumer Perceived Values and Purchase Intention

According to existing research, conformity is prevalent in various markets (Jiang et al., 2022). Molinillo et al. (2020) investigated the factors that influence the purchase of organic food and showed that health awareness related to functional value affects purchases. According to recent research, people often act according to their social referents, and environmental protection behaviour can be regarded mainly as a signal conformity with its referent. On the other hand, if people's behaviour does not conform to the group's behaviour, they may suffer higher biological costs for not fitting in. In other words, conformity encourages people with frequent social contact to conform to the group (Packer et al., 2021). When consumers perceive emotions, conformity has a significant impact on consumers' purchasing behaviour (Chen et al., 2022). Many studies have investigated how customers' perceptions of group belonging affect their conformity. People care about their reputation; social value involves the characteristics of products that may enhance consumers' personal reputation or social status and establish a connection between consumers and a specific community. Including Chinese cultural characteristics is crucial when analyzing the determinants of organic food purchase intention. The foundation of Chinese culture is collectivism, and Chinese people show a clear tendency to conform and a high sensitivity to social reputation (Qi et al., 2023). Organic food is generally considered a high-quality and expensive product; therefore, purchasing it can be seen as a status symbol and enables consumers to gain social recognition (Qi et al., 2023). When consumers' conformity influences purchasing activities, they prioritize the perceived social value the behaviour can provide (Li and Cui, 2021). Based on the above research, the following propositions are proposed:

P6a: Conformity acts as a moderator in the link between perceived functional value and consumer purchase intention. Specifically, when conformity is strong, the association

between perceived functional value and consumer purchase intention will strengthen.

P6b: Conformity acts as a moderator in the link between perceived emotional value and consumer purchase intention. Specifically, when conformity is strong, the association between perceived emotional value and consumer purchase intention will strengthen.

P6c: Conformity acts as a moderator in the link between perceived social value and consumer purchase intention. Specifically, when conformity is strong, the association between perceived social value and consumer purchase intention will strengthen.

2.9 Conceptual Framework

The literature review constructed the basic conceptual framework through the relationship between brand image, organic label, perceived functional value, perceived emotional value, perceived social value and purchase intention mentioned in the literature. A complete conceptual framework was constructed by adding conformity as a moderating variable. The proposed conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

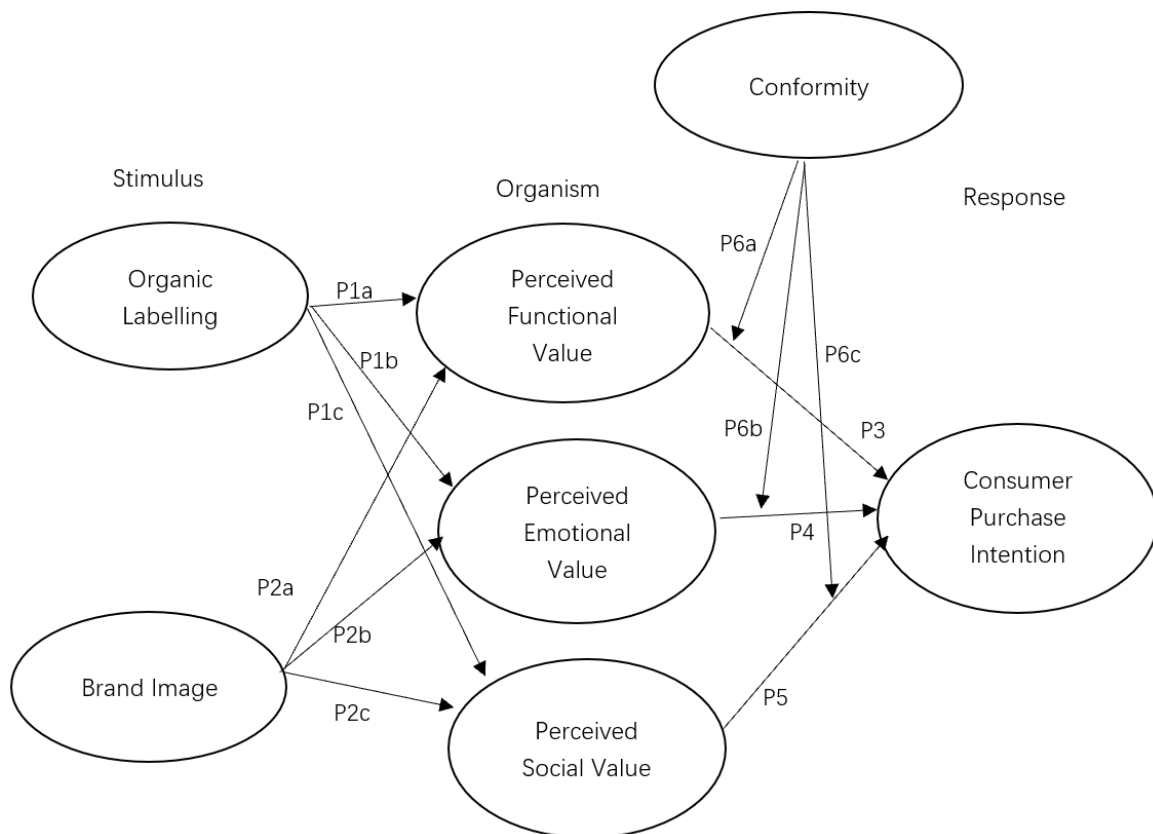


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

This study mainly adopts the quantitative research paradigm, which emphasizes data collection and quantitative analysis of the obtained data (Kumar et al., 2021). This study

theoretically examines the link between SOR (organic label, brand image, customer perceived value, and consumer purchase intention) and conformity moderators. The positivist paradigm is usually associated with quantitative research techniques that use experiments, questionnaires, or surveys to predict, control, and generalize results (Abdullah Kamal, 2019). This study will use judgmental sampling methods to collect participants. The questionnaire will be submitted through the software, and the questionnaire URL will be distributed to the target respondents through email, social media tools such as WeChat, and a professional online questionnaire service company - wenjuanxing for data collection. To ensure the validity of the online questionnaire, filtering questions were added to the questionnaire. Private information such as the name of the respondent will not be disclosed due to the confidentiality agreement. For data analysis and hypothesis testing, the PLS-SEM method was used.

4. Research Implications

First, this study combines marketing and psychology perspectives to investigate the relationship between consumers' perceived values and purchase intention, highlighting the relevance of brand image and organic labelling in organic food purchases. Considering the significant effect of conformity on purchase intention, this study explores the role of conformity as a moderator of the relationship between consumer perceived values and organic food purchase intention. Second, this study provides empirical support for government policymaking and enables market vendors to strengthen their organic food marketing strategies. Third, this study promotes organic food industry development in terms of increasing market share in the Chinese market and expanding organic food business. Subsequently, there are differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and this study only explored the factors that stimulate organic food consumption in China, and did not explore the factors that stimulate organic food purchases in the West. Finally, this study integrates the S-O-R model and Theory of Consumption Values to generate new knowledge in understanding consumer purchase intention of organic food in China.

5. Conclusion

This study proposes a conceptual model to determine the impact of brand image and organic labels on consumer perceived values and the role of conformity as a moderating variable on the relationship between consumer perceived values and purchase intention of organic food. From the literature, it can be found that conformity does affect consumer perceived values and purchase intention to varying degrees. Therefore, there is a need for this research to confirm the moderating effects collecting data and testing the conceptual model empirically.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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