
The Mediating Role of Vietnamese Consumer Trust on Organic Food Consumption

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Abstract: Although consumers show high interest in as well as positive attitudes for organic food, the actual purchase of organic foods is regularly quite low. Previous studies have used the theory of planned behavior to explain consumers' intention to buy organic food but have paid little attention on consumers' trust. Literature also have emphasized that trust has been playing crucial role in making purchase decision. Hence, the study investigated the mediating role of consumer trust in making purchase decision on organic foods. A total of 159 customers from 3 supermarkets in Thai Nguyen province were elicited for the information needed in the study. Hayes's bootstrapping procedure and corresponding SPSS macro was used to analyze the data. Results showed that trust has mediated between positive attitudes and intention to purchase organic foods. As subjective norm and perceived behavioral control have impacts on intention to buy organic food, trust also mediated these relationships. Therefore, in making purchase decisions, trust on the food has a major impact. Findings can be used to craft policies and innovations on organic foods to increase the trust of consumers thereby increasing organic consumption in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam.

Keywords: Organic Food, Trust, Attitude, Perceived Behavioral Control, Subjective Norm.

JEL: Q02, Q10, Q18.

INTRODUCTION

Organic foods have received much attention in recent years due to its value and being perceived as healthier, more nutritious, safer, and more environmentally friendly foods. This has led to the growth of its buying intention and created one of the biggest growing markets in food industry. Several studies (Aertsens et al., 2009; Al-Swidi et al., 2014; Honkanen et al., 2006; Irianto, 2015) have found that end-use consumers showed high interest in as well as positive attitudes for organic food. However, the actual regular purchase of organic food among these customers is quite low (Buder et al., 2014; Padel & Foster, 2005). This means that consumers holding a positive attitude and showing high interest on organic food do not mean they are willing to purchase organic products. Premium price (Batte et al., 2007; Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2012) and limited availability of organic products (Magnusson et al., 2003; Fotopoulos & Kystallis, 2002) are the main causes and barriers in the actual buying of organic foods among end-users. Consequently, Thøgersen (2010) pointed out that political regulation on organic foods could constrain customers' buying.

In explaining the consumers' buying intention in the context of organic food consumption, various authors (Tarkiainen & Sundqvist, 2005; Arvola et al., 2008; Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017) used the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Results using this model have shown that attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control have a positive impact on the intention to buy organic products. Although TPB can apply successfully to consumer behavior (Conner & Sparks, 1995), the predictive power of the model is accounted for 27% and 39% of the variance in behavior and intention, respectively, when 185 studies are analyzed (Armitage & Conner, 2001). But, the power is not high in terms of explaining consumer behavior in organic food consumption.

Some researchers (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Teng & Wang, 2015) include "trust" variable to explain consumer's behavior in the context of organic food consumption and found that trust has an impact on customers' intention and behavior. However, there has been inconsistency in the role of trust. Specifically, trust was an antecedent variable in the study of Teng & Wang (2015) while trust was moderating variable in the study of Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen (2017). Thus, the role of consumer trust in the context of green consuming market is still vague. Consumer trust has been playing a crucial role in consuming organic food. Trust, here, refers to expectation or intention to believe that organic food producers and providers are responsible for what they act in providing "qualified" food to customers. But, during the exchange process in "green" food, many consumers

feel that they are being cheated which shows distrust in the product (Giannakas, 2002). Trust is a credence attribute of the organic product which affected consumers' buying decision. Surprisingly, there is a lack of research on the effect of consumer trust on consumer decision-making.

The main purpose of this study was to test the effect of consumer trust in buying behavior a "green" product. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model was used to explain the buying behavior of consumers in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam by embedding the understanding of consumer trust in the conceptual model for consumer behavior while at the same time conforming to Bigley and Pearce's (1998) calling for conceptual and contextual specificity. The specific context in this study is consumer demand for organic food in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam. Thai Nguyen is a major socio-economic center of the Midlands and Northern Mountainous Region where the organic food market is still in its infancy. Hypothesizing that consumer trust will play a mediating role in the relationship between the TPB and intention to buy a green product, this study has both theoretical and practical importance for Thai Nguyen organic producers and policy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991), developed from the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), assumes that a behavior can be predicted or explained by the behavioral intention to implement that behavior. Behavioral intention is assumed to include motivational factors that influence behavior, and are defined as the level of effort that people attempt to perform that behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The central factor in the TPB is the individual's intention to perform a given behavior. This theory is extremely useful in predicting consumer behavior (Sheppard et al., 1988). Attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control are the three main factors are affecting behavioral intentions. Firstly, attitudes are conceptualized as either positive or negative judgments about the performed behavior. Social norms, on the other hand, refer to the social pressure a person felt to perform or not to perform that behavior. Finally, Ajzen (1991) formulated the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by adding perceived behavioral control elements to the TRA model. Perceptive behavioral control components reflect how easy or difficult it is to perform a behavior. This depends on the availability of resources and the opportunities to conduct behavior. Ajzen (1991) further suggested that behavioral control factors directly influence the behavioral intention, and if the person is accurate in their sense of control, then perceived behavioral control also predict actual behavior.

Attitudes in Organic Food Consumption

Attitude has been playing a crucial role in explaining organic food behavior. Attitude is a psychological construct, which includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). Rosenberg and Hovland (1960) suggest that the affective component of attitudes refers to feelings or emotions linked to an attitude object while the behavioral component of attitudes refers to the way the attitude people have influenced how they act or behave and the cognitive component refers to the beliefs, thoughts, and attributes that a person would associate with an object. Studies (Thøgersen, 2009; Arvola et al., 2008) have found that consumers buying organic foods are due to their thoughts and beliefs about good consequences (better taste, healthier, safe) proving that affection has an impact on customer buying organic food. Moreover, Ajzen (1991) stated that the more favorable the attitude concerning behavior, the stronger is the individual's intention to perform the behavior under consideration. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H₁. The intention to purchase organic products is positively influenced by the consumers' positive attitudes towards organic foods.

Subjective Norms in Organic Food Consumption

Subjective norm refers to an individual's perception about the particular behavior, which is influenced by the judgment of significant others (Ajzen, 1991). Their reference group will affect a person's behavior when he/she involves in certain behavior. Magnusson et al. (2001) has ignored subjective norms when examining organic food buying behavior, while Sparks and Shepherd (1992) have found the weak relationship between subjective norms and intention to buy organic products. In contrast, Shepherd and O'Keefe (1984), Vallerand et al. (1992), Chang (1998), and Tarkianen and Sundqvist (2005) have found a significant causal path from subjective norms and intention to buy organic foods. Thus, in this study, it is hypothesized that:

H₂. The intention to purchase organic products is positively influence by subjective norm.

Perceived Behavioral Control

Perceived behavioral control is the perception of ease or difficulty of performing a particular behavior as well as the degree of control that an individual perceives over the performance of the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). An individual can buy organic food regardless of the premium price. However, a person may not spend her/his money on this product due to financial constraints. Hence, a person can control their behavior. Thus, the decision to buy organic food is a result of a belief. Previous studies (Ajzen, 2006; Jager, 2000; Riefer & Hamm,

2008) also found that income and financial shortage are the major factors to buy organic foods. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H3: The intention to purchase organic products is positively influence by perceived behavioral control.

Consumer Trust and Purchasing Organic Food

Despite of various researches about organic foods (Buder et al., 2014; Padel & Foster, 2005), it is still unclear as to when, how and why customers buy organic products. In this study, it is predicted that trust can play a mediating role leading customers to buy green products. Trust can be defined as an expectation that another party will accomplish obligations or keep promises (Hagen & Choe, 1998; Lau & Lee, 1999). When faced with an uncertain outcome, one party can expose to the risk, and the risk can be mitigated when a level of trust in the other party is high (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust can be built from experience with the trusted party or some knowledge of this party's characteristics, such as altruism, honesty, or goodwill (Barber, 1983; Blomqvist, 1997). Recently, many academic researchers have been paying attention to consumer behavior in the context of organic food. A company can create a disembedded trust (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001; Thøgersen et al., 2010) or consumers trust more in eco-labels products once public authority certified them (Janssen & Hamm, 2012; Thøgersen, 2000). Hence, trust played a crucial role in consumer behavior in the context of organic food. However, trust's role is still vague. In this study, we test a mediation role of consumer trust with the hope that trust can help both academic researchers and practitioners to understand when, how and why consumers buy organic foods. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H4: The effect of positive attitude on intention to purchase organic products will be mediated by trust.

H5: The effect of subjective norm on intention to purchase organic products will be mediated by trust.

H6: The effect of perceived behavioral control on intention to purchase organic products will be mediated by trust.

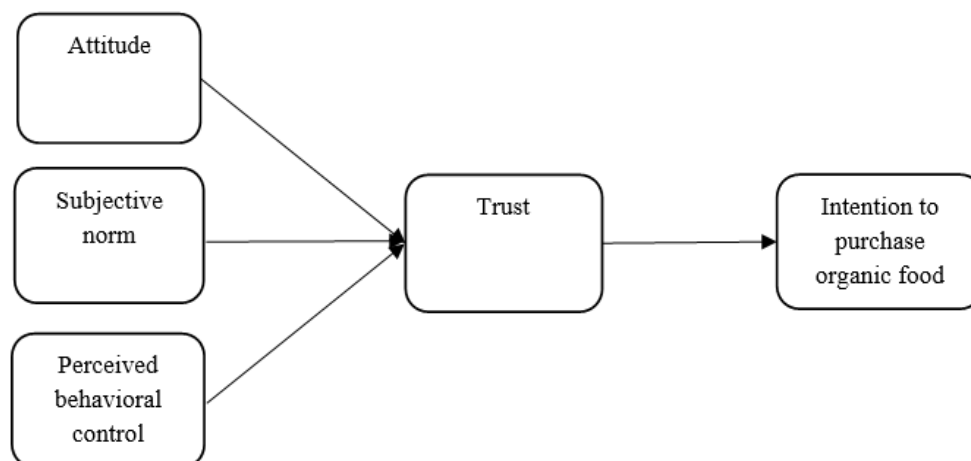


Fig.1: Research model

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

A survey was conducted which comprised a total of 159 consumer-respondents who were randomly selected in three big and famous markets, Minh Cau, Lan Chi and Vincom, in Thain Nguyen City. Each market, there were 53 consumer-respondents being asked to answer the survey.

Measures

A 5-point Likert scale was used in measuring each variable. Adopted from Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen (2017), the response was interpreted as 1 = very negative to 5 = very positive. Three organic products, fruits, vegetables and juices were used as sample products to be evaluated. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha was used to test for the reliability of item per variable. For attitude variable, three item-scale were used and resulted to $\alpha = 0.74$, suggesting that these items are reliable. Meanwhile, for subjective norm variable, participants answered a total of six questions. These questions were rated with 1 as strongly disagree to 5 as strongly agree (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). Six item-scale has a reliability score of $\alpha = 0.74$, indicating that these items are also reliable. For perceived behavioral control variable, participants answered five questions related to perceived behavioral control and rated with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree" (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). Based on the Cronbach's alpha, the five item-scale are highly reliable to measure perceived behavioral control ($\alpha = 0.87$). The moderating variable, trust, participants answered four questions related to consumer trust adopted from Teng & Wang (2015) which are (1) "I think that corporations in the field of organic foods are aware of

their responsibilities”; (2) “I trust those who sell certified organic foods indeed sell quality organic foods”; (3) I trust a quality organic food label or logos”; (4) “I trust the institutions certifying organic food products”. These item questioned has a reliability score of $\alpha = .822$, hence, it is reliable measure for trust variable.

Finally, to measure the purchasing intention/behavior, participants answered three questions evaluated with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017)”. These items scored $\alpha = 0.86$ on the reliability test which means that it is highly reliable to measure the purchase intention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1. Majority (66.7%) of the respondents were female and the rest were male implying that females were responsible in purchasing organic foods in the markets. Consequently, most (33.3%) of these respondents were earning between 4M VND to 8M VND a month and only few (17%) earned more than 12M VND having vocational training courses (31.4%) and graduated in college or university (30.2%). Further, most (34%) of them were relatively old who aged 46-55 years old but there were also relatively young respondents whose age range from 18-25 years old (20.1%). This means that consumer of organic products are both young and old. There were no significant differences between gender, salary, education, age, and education and purchasing organic food (all $p > .05$).

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	106	66.7
	Male	53	33.3
	Total	159	100.0
Salary	<4.000.000	38	23.9
	4.000.001 - 8.000.000	53	33.3
	8.000.001 - 12.000.000	41	25.8
	> 12.000.000	27	17.0
	Total	159	100.0
Education	High school	27	17.0
	Vocational training	50	31.4
	College, University	48	30.2
	Postgraduate	34	21.4
	Total	159	100.0
Age	18-25	32	20.1
	26-35	49	30.8
	36-45	18	11.3
	46-55	54	34.0
	>56	6	3.8
	Total	159	100.0

Regression Analysis

For testing H_1 and H_4 , we used Hayes (2017) bootstrapping procedure and corresponding SPSS macro to test for a significant direct effect of attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control to the intention to purchase organic food. Also, it was used to test for a significant indirect effect between attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control to the intention to purchase organic food via consumer trust. Five thousand bootstrap resamples were performed. Results are presented in Table 2.

The total effect of attitude on intention to purchase organic food was not statistically significant at $\alpha=0.05$ but it significantly affecting trust at $p=0.0156$ which is less than $\alpha=0.05$. Consequently, the effect of trust on purchasing organic food was statistically significant as well. Further, as trust was affected by attitude, it also significantly influenced the intention to purchase organic food, $B = .55$, ($SE = .096$), $t(158) = 5.57$, $p < .001$. The result showed that the direct effect of attitude on intention to purchase green products, after controlling for the mediating influence of trust, was found to be not significant, $B = -.0004$, ($SE = .93$), $t(158) = .0047$, $p > .005$. The indirect effect (the mediated effect) of attitude on the intention to purchase organic food via trust was -0.102 at 95% confidence interval, (CI). Moreover, both partially and completely standardized indirect effects of attitude on intention to purchase organic foods were supported (partial indirect effect $-.12$, $SE = .06$, with 95% confident interval CI = $-.24$, $-.022$, and complete indirect effect $-.08$, $SE = .036$, with 95% confident interval CI = $-.16$, $-.014$). Thus, trust mediates the relationship between attitude and purchasing intention.

Table 2: Regression results of simple mediation (1)

	Intention to purchase organic food (DV)			Trust (MV)			Intention to purchase organic food (DV)		
	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value
Constant	4.17**	.421	9.89	4.92**	.32	15.48	1.44*	.61	2.361
Attitude	-.103	.099	-1.027	.184*	.075	2.44	-.0004	.093	.0047
Trust							.55**	.096	5.75
R ²	.0067			.037			.181		
Indirect Effect ^a	-.102								
95% CI ^b	[-.20, -.017]								

Note. N = 159. DV = dependent variable. MV = mediator variable.

a. Significant using normal distribution.

b. Bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect estimate through 5,000 bootstrap samples

* p < .05, ** p < .001

Table 3 shows the result of the test conducted to ascertain the relationship of subjective norm and intention to purchase and the mediating role of trust. Same procedures were done in testing for attitude variables. As shown in the table, the total effect of subjective norm on intention to purchase organic food was statistically significant, $B = .595$, ($SE = .124$), $t(158) = 4.795$, $p < .001$ and its “trust” was also statistically significant, $B = .873$, ($SE = .074$), $t(158) = 11.77$, $p < .001$. Further, as trust was affected by subjective norm, it influenced the consumers’ intention to purchase organic food, $B = .595$, ($SE = .124$), $t(158) = 4.795$, $p < .001$. However, after controlling for the mediating influence of trust, the direct effect of subjective norm on intention to purchase organic food was not statistically significant, $B = .204$, ($SE = .165$), $t(158) = 1.27$, $p > .005$. The indirect effect (the mediated effect) of subjective norm on intention to purchase organic food via trust was $.386$ ($SE = .147$), 95% confidence interval. Moreover, both partially and completely standardized indirect effects of subjective norms on intention to purchase organic foods were supported (partial indirect effect $.472$, $SE = .172$, with 95% confidence interval $CI = .144, .82$, and complete indirect effect $.232$, $SE = .085$, with 95% confident interval $CI = .071, .412$). Thus, trust is mediating in the relationship between subjective norms and purchasing intention and subjective norms positively affected the intention to purchase green products.

Table 3: Regression results of simple mediation (2)

	Intention to purchase organic food (DV)			Trust (MV)			Intention to purchase organic food (DV)		
	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value
Constant	1.25*	.52	2.39	.499	.312	1.59	1.03	.51	2.02
Subjective norm	.595**	.124	4.795	.873**	.074	11.77	.204	.165	1.27
Trust							.443**	.129	3.43
R ²	.128			.469			.189		
Indirect Effect ^a	.386								
95% CI ^b	[.113, .69]								

Note. N = 159. DV = dependent variable. MV = mediator variable.

a. Significant using normal distribution.

b. Bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect estimate through 5,000 bootstrap samples

* p < .05, ** p < .001

Shown int Table 4 are the result of testing H₃ and H₆, using Hayes (2017) bootstrapping procedures. The total effect of perceived behavioral control on purchasing organic food was found to be statistically significant as well as its effect on trust. Further, as trust influenced the intention to purchase organic food, $B = .48$, ($SE = .12$), $t(158) = 4.08$, $p < .001$. The direct effect of perceive behavioral control on intention to purchase organic food, after controlling for the mediating influence of trust, was found to be not significant, $B = .14$, ($SE = .12$), $t(158) = 1.09$, $p > .005$ and the indirect effect (the mediated effect) of subjective norm on intention to purchase organic food via trust was $.302$ at 95% confidence interval. Moreover, both partially and completely standardized indirect effects of perceived behavioral control on intention to purchase organic foods were supported (partial indirect effect $.37$, $SE = .10$, with 95% confident interval $CI = .177, .575$, and complete indirect effect $.22$, $SE = .063$, with 95% confidence interval $CI = .10, .347$). Thus, trust is mediating in the relationship between

perceived behavioral control and intention to purchase and perceived behavioral control also has a positive effect on intention to purchase organic foods, thereby, accepting the hypotheses.

Table 4: Regression results of simple mediation (3)

	Intention to purchase organic food (DV)			Trust (MV)			Intention to purchase organic food (DV)		
	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value	Coefficient	SE	t-value
Constant	1.87**	.45	.4.13	1.45**	.29	4.94	1.17*	.46	2.53
Perceived behavioral control	.44**	.11	4.18	.63**	.07	9.28	.14	.12	1.09
Trust							.48**	.12	4.08
R ²	.10			.35			.19		
Indirect Effect ^s	.302								
95% CI ^b	[.137, .485]								

Note. N = 159. DV = dependent variable. MV = mediator variable.

a. Significant using normal distribution.

b. Bias-corrected confidence interval for the indirect effect estimate through 5,000 bootstrap samples

* p < .05, ** p < .001

Hypothesis test	Result
H1. Positive attitudes towards buying organic food will positively influence to organic product purchasing behavior.	Not supported
H2. Subjective norm will positively influence to organic product purchasing behavior.	Supported
H3. Perceived behavioral control will positively influence to organic product purchasing behavior.	Supported
H4: The effect of a positive attitude on purchasing organic food will be mediated by trust.	Supported
H5: The effect of subjective norm on purchasing organic food will be mediated by trust.	Supported
H6: The effect of perceived behavioral control on purchasing organic food will be mediated by trust.	Supported

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the study intends to explain the mediating role of consumers' intention to purchase organic food based on theory of planned behavior, it was found that both the subjective norm and perceived behavioral control have direct significant impacts on the intention to buy organic foods. These results are consistent with previous studies (Ajzen, 2006; Chang, 1998; Jager, 2000; Riefer & Hamm, 2008; Tarkianen & Sundqvist, 2005; Vallerand et al., 1992). However, this study revealed that attitude did not significantly affect the intentions to purchase organic food. This deviates from the result of previous studies which stated that attitude has a positive impact on intention to buy organic products (Ajzen, 2006; Chang, 1998; Jager, 2000; Riefer & Hamm, 2008; Tarkianen & Sundqvist, 2005; Thøgersen, 2000; Thøgersen, 2010; Vallerand et al., 1992; Vindigni, Janssen, & Jager, 2002). This is probably due to the lack of trust that consumers in Thai Nguyen on the organic food since it is new for them. Moreover, even after eating green products, they can hardly recognize its quality or taste as compared to the conventional ones. This explained why Thai Nguyen consumers do not purchase green products even when they hold a positive attitude toward these goods.

Results further revealed that consumer trust mediated in the relationship between attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and intention to buy organic foods. Indeed, trust was considered as conduit of these variables towards the intention of consumers to purchase organic foods. Even though attitude was found to have no direct impact on the intention to buy green products, when trust was added, consumers' intention becomes positive. This means that when people trust organic food supply chain (producers, suppliers, seller) they tend to buy more organic food.

With these results, the study has some contributions to both theoretical and practical implications as follows:

Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contributions of the study are as follows: First, the study tests simultaneously the influences of TPB variables and the mediating role of consumer trust on the intention to buy organic foods. In previous studies, scholars only consider trust as part of perceived behavioral control (Soyez et al., 2012) or as separate component of TPB (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017) in the relationship between TPB with intention to purchase organic foods. Second, this study has enriched our understanding of how, when and why consumers buy green products.

Practical Contributions

This study provides managerial implications. Consumer trust plays a significant role in decision-making, especially in the case of green products. The managers, therefore, need to ensure that all participants in their supply chain keep their promises when supplying organic foods to end-user customers. The results of the study will help managers know how to make customer increase their trust during selling green goods.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER STUDY

Although this study shed light on a mediating role of trust and gained a good result, there are some limitations. Firstly, in this research, we relied on Vietnamese people from one province, one culture (Thai Nguyen– Vietnam) where organic foods are quite novel to the customers. People from different culture will display different personal trust and institutional trust. For example, in Western countries when institutional regulations are transparent, people from this culture will trust more in public authority than others from other cultures. Hofstede et al. (2006) argue that intrinsic trust, based on a person's feelings and needs to affiliate with the other given vulnerability, is more important in collectivistic, cooperation-oriented cultures, than enforceable trust based on performance, which is more important in individualistic, performance-oriented cultures. Therefore, future study should approach trust in a different culture. Secondly, during the survey, we only asked questions about three main organic products such as fruits, vegetables, and juices that can hardly generalize all kinds of organic foods. Hence, further study should expand more research on other kinds of organic products.

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