

# Factors influencing consumers' green purchase behavior for sustainable organic food by Botswana university students

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## Abstract

Sustainability issues are increasingly becoming more important in business and society with many businesses in the food sector adopting green organic food production. Understanding factors that influence consumer green purchasing behavior will be helpful to food marketers. The purpose of this study is to investigate factors influencing consumers' green purchase behavior for sustainable organic food by Botswana University students. To achieve this purpose the study followed an investigative qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were used to gather data. A sample of 15 university students was selected using a purposive sampling method. Results show that the factors that influence consumers' green purchasing behavior for organic foodstuff by university students in Botswana are multi-faceted including marketing selection attributes such as (price, promotion, distribution, product performance, health consciousness), environmental consciousness (environmental awareness, environmental knowledge) and consumer environmental/ green attitudes. The practical implications are that businesses involved in organic food need to intensify the promotion and education of consumers on issues of green and sustainable organic food. The focus should be on the impact of green products on society, people, and the environment.

**Keywords:** Sustainable marketing, Green products, Organic food, Green purchasing behavior

## Introduction

Sustainable organic food is food that is produced using ecologically friendly processes with little negative impact on the natural environment (Durif, Boivin & Julien, 2010; Tandon et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Rana and Paul, 2020). Organic foodstuffs are produced following more advanced green methods of production and processing (Galkin and Pospelova, 2021). The development of this concept has prompted the creation of the concept of green consumption which is defined as the process of consuming more organically produced foodstuffs that are more sustainably produced in more socially and environmental way (Peattie, 1992; Testa et al., 2021; Han, 2020). A green consumer refers to a buyer who is environmentally conscious in making purchase decisions. They primarily make purchase choices considering largely ecological considerations (Nittala 2014; Sheil et al., 2020; Halder et al., 2020). Green consumers are also known as ethical consumers because they are deemed to do what is right for the environment, society, and the economy (Halder et al., 2020).

The challenge of striking a balance between attaining environmental sustainability and economic prosperity faces the majority of economies worldwide (Smith & Perks, 2010; de Marais et al., 2021; Fonseca et al., 2020). Central to finding a balance between these two important perspectives is the understanding and cooptation of the consumer. It has been well noted that consumers have become more environmentally wired (Ko, Hwang, and Kim, 2013; Kautish and Sharma, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), first in the developed world and recently even in developing countries like Botswana. The world is experiencing a green consumption dynamic wherein buyers adopt sustainable consumption patterns (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Li et al.,

2020; Yue et al., 2020). As buying green products is becoming widespread, many food marketers and entrepreneurs are taking it as a source of building and sustaining an edge over their competitors (Tu and Wu, 2021). This is made possible through innovative solutions to invent more organic options for the market (Follows and Jobber, 2000; Jiang et al., 2021; Razzaq et al., 2021). The field of marketing is therefore better placed to play a fundamental role in mediating and balancing consumption and sustainability. Despite the more knowledge of green issues and the proliferation of organic foodstuffs, there is not much known about the factors influencing the green purchase behavior for sustainable organic food in Botswana especially by the youth. Understanding these factors will shape the future of business, society, and the environment. Firstly the youth are the majority and therefore consequently are the future of the market. Understanding their behavior will be pivotal in influencing innovation, marketing communication discourse, distribution as well as pricing decisions.

Most markets around the globe have experienced increased awareness of environmental issues (Razaq et al., 2021). This has been exacerbated by the promotion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations to promote sustainability in terms of the triple bottom line of planet, people, and profits (Gunawan et al., 2021). These developments have resulted in a radical change towards sustainable consumption patterns. Consumers are showing more preference for products they consider organic and environmentally friendly as opposed to the traditional products they are used to buying. There is a growing force of green consumerism that has the potential to achieve SDGs and general prosperity (Bali Swain, 2020). Organic products are distinguished in many ways starting from the production, packaging, pricing, and management of the end-of-life of the product and associated materials. They are deemed bio-degradable and can support the natural ecosystems. Consumers build interest in the hope that these products promote people's health, emit zero carbon, and are recyclable, and are generally energy efficient (Elliott, 201; Tezer and Bodur, 2020).

### **Literature review**

In seeking to understand sustainable organic consumption, we first need to appreciate the underlying concepts of sustainable marketing and understand consumer decision-making from both theoretical and empirical perspectives.

### **Sustainable marketing**

Sustainable marketing is also known as green marketing (Astini et al., 2022). It encompasses the development, production, promotion, and marketing of products deemed as environmentally safe in a way that satisfies the customer (Tiwari, Tripathi, Srivastava, and Yadav, 2011; Yue et al., 2020). There are two perspectives to this the consumer perspective that puts the consumer at the center and the environmental perspective that puts the ecology at the center. Green marketing is very broad encompassing designing, production, packaging, pricing, promotion, distribution, and disposal of products in more consumer and societal satisfactory ways. The literature on sustainable marketing acknowledges that situational, psychographic, and demographic factors influence the purchasing behavior of green consumers (Cheah & Phau, 2011; Irawan & Darmayanti, 2012; Leonidou et al., 2010; Kautish and Sharma, 2020; Han, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Conversely, Chen and Chang (2012) argue that it is important to recognize how green product attributes—like price, performance, and quality affect consumers' decision to buy.

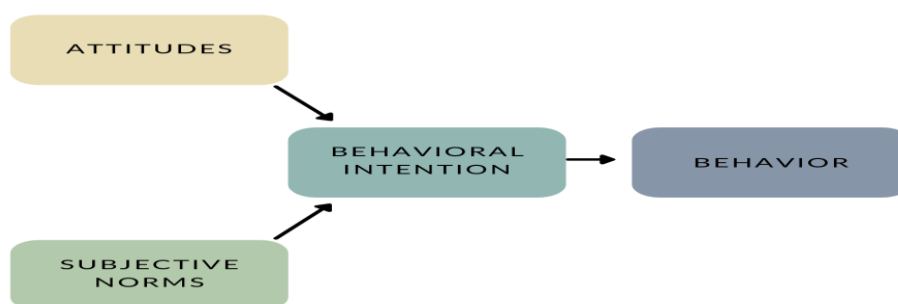
### **Green purchase behavior**

To properly understand green buying behavior is to understand the consumers. Consumers' needs have always been dynamic and led to the development of the green consumerism era. Consumers frequently engage in green marketing practices to lessen their ecological footprint. These practices include buying environmentally friendly products, recycling, conserving energy, and conserving water (Gadenne, Sharma, Kerr & Smith, 2011; Kautish and Sharma, 2020; Razzaq et al., 2021). The increasing importance of sustainable consumption is creating a niche market of environmentally conscious consumers. The behavior of green buyers is influenced by a multitude of factors, including attitudes, personal capabilities, and contextual factors (Azjen and Fishbein, 1969; Jansson, Marell, & Nordlund 2010; Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008; Tester et al., 2021; Tandon et al. 2020). Conceptually speaking, "green buyer behavior" refers to a

customer's propensity to take actions that advance environmental welfare (Datta 2011; Halder et al., 2020), purchasing products that will satisfy customers and do the least amount of harm to the environment.

### Theoretic approach to Consumer decision-making

Many theories could be used to explain consumer decision-making about green products in Botswana. These can be identified in the area of demographics such as the Generational Theory and the Theory of social comparison. Theories may include the influence of psychographic variables such as the Theory of Reasoned Action and the Self-concept theory. Some behaviors are said to be attributed to issues of ethics, exposure to marketing information, group factors as well as many contextual environmental factors. To explain consumer decision-making, this paper will discuss the Theory of Reasoned Action by Fishbein and Azjen (1967). The theory assumes that decision-making is a subject of two factors consumers' attitudes and their subjective norms that reflect an individual's perception. This suggests that purchasing decisions are made more by people based on their desires than on true needs. A model of how behavior is built from personal attitudes and subjective norms is presented in Figure 1 below.



*Source: Fishbein and Azjen (1967)*

The theory posits that individuals make decisions based on their understanding of the possible outcomes of their decisions. Other theories however argue that individuals make decisions, such as consumption patterns as a result of pressures from society, family, and or ethical standards. These factors could explain why consumers may opt to buy green and become green or organic buyers. The theory portrays humans as rational beings who make decisions based on knowledge. A person's intention to engage in a particular behavior is influenced by their affective and cognitive attitudes (Aman et al., 2012:147). Customers evaluate eco-friendly products based on price, perceived risk, performance, and reliability.

### Research Methodology

To achieve the objective of the study a qualitative research approach was used. Subjective data was gathered using in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted at the selected university campus student lounges. The target population of this study was the youth who are university students. A sample of fifteen respondents was selected from four universities based in Gaborone, Botswana. Eight female students and seven male students were selected following a purposive sampling method. Learners who showed some knowledge of green issues were selected for this study on a judgmental basis. This ensured that only those with some prior knowledge of organic foods and green practices participated so that they added more value to the study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the help of an unstructured interview guide. There was room for probing where follow-ups helped to generate an in-depth understanding of the motive for purchasing organic foodstuff. The interview guide was shared with identified respondents before the interviews to help them familiarize themselves with the general content of what was discussed in the interviews. The interpretive thematic analysis method was used for data analysis where the analysis was done based on particular common themes. Themes were grouped into fewer categories based on how the subcategories related to one another in building conclusions.

### Results and discussion of findings

The analysis was done using the thematic analysis method. The themes used are related to the different selection attributes as borrowed from the literature such as environmental knowledge, product attributes, other marketing mix attributes as promotional messages, pricing and distribution decisions as well as brand strength. The responses were summarized as follows:

*Table 1: Summary of findings by gender*

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Total significant</i>	<i>Total insignificant</i>
Health benefits	8	4	12	3
Pricing of organic food stuff	8	3	11	4
Availability of products and their accessibility	7	4	11	4
Product knowledge through marketing promotions	6	4	10	5
Knowledge of environmental benefits	3	5	8	7
Supplier brand image and strength	3	3	6	8

Table 1 above shows summaries of the interviews that were conducted relating to the main themes under investigation. The total significance shows the number of respondents who considered the respective factor/theme when making purchase decisions for organic foodstuff. The findings show that most customers will buy as influenced by a mix of several attributes.

***Perceived health benefits***

Results show that the majority of consumers buy organic products because of their perceived health benefits. They think that green products are highly performing especially as it relates to personal health and wellness. They emphasized that organic products help keep consumers’ weight in check as quoted by one respondent who emphasized that *“I will buy if I think they can keep my weight in check”*. This opinion is especially very significant to female consumers meaning that they are more health conscious relative to their male counterparts. This shows that some customers perceive these products as having numerous health benefits due to how they are engineered. This supports a study by Isaksson et al., (2012) who contend that buyers consider health benefits before purchasing foodstuff. This is also supported by Han (2020) who posits that consumers choose restaurants primarily based on the health benefits derived from the food sold. Anjana et al., (2022) stress that this is the case especially where the aspect of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes are concerned. Respondents stressed the aspect of health benefits as quoted below:

*“...I buy organic green products often such as meat, eggs, vegetables, milk, and cooking oil among other products. I believe they are good for my health”*

Other customers are however skeptical and believe that the actual performance is hard to judge.

*“...Performance is hard to judge at this moment but will only buy because of the perceived benefits”*. This former view is especially held by male buyers. This implies that people buy these products only on beliefs and attitudes and not necessarily on something that they know has been proven. This is in line with findings by Galkin and Pospelova (2020) who posit that beliefs and opinions could be adequate to influence consumer choices.

***The market price for organic food products***

The other selection criteria considered is the aspect of marked price for organic products. A majority of respondents 11 of both genders regard his factor as very significant in influencing their purchase decisions. Respondents indicated that they will buy green products if they find them at the right price. This factor tends to be very pragmatic, especially in a third-world country like Botswana where people have to balance affordability and other multiple benefits. This confirms the findings by Wang et al., (2020) that stressed that

marketing factors such as price, quality, and availability may play a pivotal role in influencing green organic purchasing choices. Respondents emphasized this as follows:

*“...I buy when available at the right price”. Some consider the products to be relatively too expensive compared to what they are used to buying. “...the prices are often more expensive than other normal products that we have been used to”. “I am not consistent in buying these products due to the high prices meaning sometimes I forgo the benefits because of price. Generally because of this, I am not consistent in buying these organic products”*

This means that businesses involved in organic products may need to push product prices down to build a more loyal and consistent customer base.

### ***Convenience and availability of organic products***

The factor of availability and easy access to organic products is also significant in influencing purchase decisions as depicted in Table 1 above. Customers lament the lack of unavailability of the products as one reason sometimes they do not frequently buy them. According to a significant majority of the respondents, the more the products are available conveniently the more they are inclined to buy them. Store image can be important too. This was emphasized as follows:

*“...Products are found in exclusive top outlets like Woolworths that are out of reach to us as students. Sometimes we want them but are not necessarily available so I end up buying what’s available. By the way Woolworths stores are very few here in Gaborone, that’s the only store I know for sure that generally sells organic food”.*

They cited some very well-known and trusted retail stores such as Woolworths in the market that are however expensive and too exclusive for students.

### ***Knowledge of environmental benefits***

As far as the environmental issues are concerned as influencing factors on consumer purchase decision making, attributes such as environmental issues knowledge and awareness were important and not very significant in influencing consumer purchase decisions for the target population for this study. Although some are aware of these issues, they were however less influential in purchase decision making. There are few however who have strong views on this aspect. Some male university learners indicated that they have some knowledge and understanding of issues of the environment and are somewhat environmentally conscious as some are active in environmental protection, *“...As a tertiary education level learner I have learned a lot about the environment and I do appreciate the impact products may have on the environment so I am very conscious on the purchase decisions that I make”*. Some buyers are however indifferent and are adamant that their purchasing choices are largely influenced by some marketing-driven factors as the marketing mix more than they are influenced by ecological requirements and awareness. This is in line with the findings by Wang et al., (2020) who stressed that knowledge of green issues sometimes is not adequate and cannot be a predictor of purchase decision-making.

*“...As far as the safeguarding of the environment is concerned, I am not sure – I think it’s largely marketing strategy and nothing else that influences my decision-making. I would like it if they make meaningful changes to the environment but the products must primarily have the right price and must be available when I need them – I don’t need to hustle to find them”* Others emphasized this point that other factors are more important to them than environmental factors, for example, another responded emphasized as follows:

*“...Honestly consider factors that have a direct effect on me as a person e.g. price, quality, design, taste, and package”*

Sometimes the influences are not environmental but are intrinsic to each buyer. This concurs with Azjen and Fishbein (1969) who stress that individuals sometimes need to make conscious decisions based on their attitudes and norms.

## Conclusions

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the factors that influence green consumer behavior for organic products are the level of environmental knowledge, product attributes, and other marketing mix attributes such as promotional messages, pricing, and distribution decisions. The more knowledge consumers have on green organic products the more they are inclined to buy them and the lesser the knowledge they have the lesser they are inclined to buy them. Product attributes such as perceived quality, health benefits, and perceived risk will be significant in influencing buying decisions. The marketing mix attributes such as pricing, promotion, and distribution will also influence green buying behavior. Although customers may want to buy organic green products, sometimes they are limited by exorbitantly high prices, if prices are low they can be encouraged to try and adopt buying them consistently. For most consumers to access them, products may need to be intensively distributed. Promotional messages must provide more detailed information on organic products and must educate consumers on the impact the green product has on society and the planet.

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