

A Study of the Perceptions of Organic Food of Malay and Chinese Customers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study identifies the perceptions of organic food from the top two largest demographic profiles in Malaysia, which are the Malay and Chinese consumers. A total of four factors have been identified in previous research which are the most influential factors in regards to organic food purchase intentions and are categorized thematically – (1) health consciousness, (2) taste, (3) willingness to pay, as well as (4) family and culture influences. The understanding of the preferences and influences is crucial for foodservice providers and/or operators to not only attract new individuals to try organic food but also to minimize the uncertainty that arises in the food industry and achieve higher goals by understanding customers' perceptions.

Keywords: Malay customers, Chinese customers, organic food, purchase intentions

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian consumers are becoming aware of the existence of healthy food. As a developing country, the education level of the population in Malaysia is increasing; therefore, with the changes in the socio-demographic and economic factors, Malaysians are becoming more willing to spend for higher quality, healthy and safe food products. These trends found in Malaysian consumers' characteristic have given pressure, especially to the food and beverage industry, as they aim to satisfy customers which can lead to maximization of profits and also to building a long term relationship with profitable customers[1].

Although the consumption of organic food is increasing, it is however a relatively new concept in Malaysia. Therefore, it is important for Malaysian foodservice operators to understand their consumers' behavior and identify the factors which are af-

fecting their organic food purchase intentions. This study can established that there is a need to identify which group of consumers to target and how they are to be segmented in order to satisfy them by using the appropriate promotional tools effectively based on their perceptions towards organic food.

As Malaysia is a multi-cultural nation primarily comprised of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous customers, the problem statement for this study is to identify the perceptions of organic food based on the selected four factors in Malaysia. This study intended to investigate the reasons Malaysian consumers purchase organic food. Based on the literature review, the first factor that influences consumers to purchase organic food is health consciousness. It was identified that a majority of consumers are concerned about their health and believe that organic food provides better health benefits[2]. The following questions were addressed:

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- (1) What role does health play when you choose organic foods and dining options?
- (2) What is the role of taste in your choice of organic food?
- (3) Are you willing to pay extra for organic products and to dine at organic restaurants?
- (4) Do your beliefs and values influence your intention to purchase organic products and dine at organic restaurants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Health Consciousness

For consumers who are health conscious, they are aware of their health conditions and mostly are motivated to improve their quality of life by focusing on their food intake and these are the motives for the consumption of organic food[3]. Organic consumers pay more attention to health factors compared to pricing of the organic products[4]. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for restaurants to come up with new strategy to target the Malaysian market as the organic agriculture is developing at a fast pace[5]. The Malaysian consumers are becoming more aware of the healthy food that most probably comes from the alterations in the socio-demographic and economic factors. These factors can influence a consumer's intention to consume organic food in Malaysia. The lifestyle of an individual is also an important factor for consumers to decide their food choices[2]. Besides that, an individual's positive attitude towards health-related issues affect their organic food product consumption decisions in a favorable manner[6].

Taste

Taste is actually one of the important factors when selecting food items in the food industry[7]. There are researchers who found that organic products can be consumed safely and tastes better compared to conventional products[2]. Taste is also one of the important attributes for consumers to select organic food. Another important factor to consider in terms of the taste in organic food is the possibility of the multi-ethnic community in Malaysia, which consists of Malay, Chinese, Indian and also other races[6]. Different ethnic groups may perceive the tastes of organic food differently. Taste acceptability varies

among different culture partially because different climates influences the countries' availability of organic products. The freshness of the food can affect the different perception of taste[8]. However, individuals who are more concerned about their health are less likely to consider taste as one of the factors when consuming organic food[7]. In general, consumers perceive organic food to be higher in price compared to conventional food. Therefore, consumers expect organic food to be of high quality and to taste better[9,10]. Taste of organic food is important for restaurants which wants to persuade consumers to try organic for the first time and increase the spending on organic products[11]. Hence, it is important for the organic market to focus on the freshness and quality of organic ingredients because taste only can be evaluated after consumers experiences and will affect their future purchase decisions[12].

Willingness to Pay

Willingness to pay, which is also known as WTP, is constructed as a behavioral outcome which explains the consumer's wiliness to buy a specific item or product in comparison with the prices[13]. Consumers' who purchase organic are concerned about the environmental issues and food safety, hence, the demand for organic food can be predicted by observing the WTP for organic products[14]. Organic products and food, due to limited availability in the market, are sold at premium prices, which means that their prices are slightly higher than conventional food prices thus considered a major barrier for many consumers[10]. These prices are used by consumers to form opinions about the product, quality and taste of organic food items[9]. The amount that consumers are willing to pay for organic products is driven by the perceived value and benefits that can be gained by consuming organic food such as the food safety concerns and health awareness[2]. Enerally, organic products are known as more nutritious and safer to be consumed compared to conventional food; therefore, consumers are always comparing prices that they pay and the value of the product[5].

Family and Consumers' Culture

Last but not least, the fourth important factor that

influences consumers to purchase organic products or food is the cultural influence on the individual. Culture can be defined as a combination of different characteristics, attitudes, behaviors and family values and guides an individual on how to portray a behavior on eating habits[15]. Religious and cultural issues play an important role in influencing an individual's food choices in many societies[2]. Religion has an impact on food consumption where it causes an individual to follow the teachings of their religion as some religions prohibit consumptions of certain foods for example, pork in the Islam religion, or pork and beef in Hinduism and Buddhism. There are three major races in Malaysia, Malays, Chinese and Indian. These different races have their own culture and beliefs. Therefore, these differences have some impact on consumer behavior in consuming organic products. The purchasing behaviors of Malaysians towards organic food products is seen by the characteristics of the Malaysian diverse culture[16]. Indians are found to have a strong belief in purchasing health-supplements besides consuming organic food products[6] (Quah & Tan, 2009). Furthermore, Chinese consumers, who are more concerned about the environmental issue such as the use of pesticides on ingredients or chemical additives, have higher intentions to pay for organic food products[6] (Quah & Tan, 2009). The family size is another factor affecting Malaysians' perception of organic food products where new generations have their own taste and preferences. Quah and Tan (2009)[6] reported that the importance of organic food products in the Chinese diet was decreasing.

METHODS

Data Collection

The setting of the research is based on interviewing 2 groups; each group consisted of 6 persons who had consumed organic food products in a restaurant and were willing to express their perceptions of organic food based on their experiences. In addition, these focus groups consisted of Malay and Chinese as their different ethnicity and sets of beliefs have an impact on their perception of organic food[17]. This research used focus groups to collect data because focus groups allow participants to respond to

questions more naturally and participants tend to feel more at ease in a social setting. Further the data and ideas obtained may be more productive[18].

Participants were first, screened for having consumed organic food products in a restaurant in Malaysia. Secondly, the participants were selected who were native Chinese and Malay. The data were collected from the month of August 2015 to December 2015 and the collection of data incorporated 2 types of tools; demographic information and focus groups. The reasoning behind collecting demographic data was to understand more about the respondents in order to analyze the responses more specifically and avoid producing generalized perceptions[19]. The demographic elements included in this research were: age, gender, and race.

RESULTS

Qualitative data that were retrieved from 12 respondents in two different focus groups to identify the perceptions of organic food of Malay and Chinese customers. Data were categorized into four themes that emerged from the focus groups: (1) health; (2) taste; (3) willingness to pay (WTP); and (4) family influence.

Health

Health is the most common reason among respondents for selecting organic food in previous research, as well as in this research. Among the 12 respondents, most agreed that health is the reason they consume organic food. The participants in the focus group interviews identified that the nutritional value of organic food is the main influencer to purchase organic food.

"... There are nutrients in organic food that allows me to stay healthy ..."

"... The quality of the organic food compared with normal vegetables bought at the hypermarkets are higher and their texture is more vibrant in color and crunchier in taste ..."

"... Organic food are pesticides-free. So they are healthier as they don't have chemicals in it ..."

A plausible explanation for these findings could

be because organic food goes through lower or minimal amount of food processing as compared to conventional foods[20]. Although there was no solid evidence that organic food has the most nutrients, studies showed that the public's health concern is more of an indicator of the consumption of organic food than the concern for the environment[9]. This study is consistent with previous research as many consumers perceived that organic foods are beneficial to their health despite the difference in culture[4]. Both races in Malaysia are aware that organic food has lower usage of chemicals compared to conventional food. Therefore, it can be established that there is no significant difference in terms of health consciousness when consuming organic food between Malays and Chinese. Both races agree that health is crucial in an individual's life as one of the respondent shared.

"... One of my family members had cancer. That is why my family is all aware the importance of health and then we start to eat at organic restaurants ..."

This finding suggest that there are very limited cultural distances between the Malay and Chinese respondents in terms of health as a purchase intention for organic food. A possible explanation of such belief that health is the main intention to purchase organic food is that consumers perceived that the products are more environmental friendly, safe and good for their health[22]. A majority of the respondents agreed that health was the main motivator to consume organic food. One respondent maintained that that the main purchase intention for consuming organic food was adventure.

"... I had organic food once because I just want to give it a try ..."

This finding suggests that the respondent belongs to the "adventurous consumer" group as these consumers are more likely to give higher priority to natural ingredients and new menu items as they have the greatest interest in trying new food[23], and in this research, the respondent was willing to try organic food. But the respondent did not refer to con-

tinuing to purchase organic food. Organic food has been rising over the past few years as consumer interest in organic food is increasing. Restaurants have changed to accommodate those interests by incorporating locally grown or organic food into their cooking style and menu[23]. Hence, there are consumers who are willing to try organic food without the intention to improve their health but to follow the trend in the restaurant industry. This phenomenon may cross all races and is worthy of study.

Taste

In regards to taste, findings suggest that there is a presence of fairly high variation between Malay and Chinese respondents towards organic food. Focus group responses that most of the respondents were unable to accept the taste of organic food in restaurants. However, some of them are aware of the taste differences due to the brands and the texture of naturally grown ingredients.

"... Conventional food have more preservatives and has varieties of flavors and organic food naturally has its own taste ..."

"... I know some of the brands of organic food which is quite tasty for me and I like it..."

"... The ingredients they used also quite fresh and it does taste nicer than other [conventional] food ..."

These findings suggest that consumers give a relatively high importance to values which are linked to sensory, nutritional and quality characteristics of organic food as they consider taste is important in their dining experience because food is also a matter of pleasure[24]. Furthermore, consumers will have certain taste expectations towards food, especially organic food as Malaysia has a wide variety of food and cuisines due to the multicultural influences on the food and beverage industry.

"... If the price is high, my expectation towards the taste is higher as well ..."

The respondent stated that the prices charged for organic food must be worth the value in terms of taste as the authenticity of the taste and food tex-

ture are among the most important aspects that give consumers pleasure when eating organic products [24]. Taste is important for first-timers' patrons in order for organic restaurants to attract them. This is because the sensory qualities, which includes the food taste and also the food choices presented to the customers is crucial to ensure the satisfaction of the diners' experiences[25,26]. Therefore, it is important for organic restaurants to focus on producing better quality organic food choices as there are other textures and authentic tastes of foods in Malaysia that influence consumers' sensory satisfaction.

"...I've actually only eaten organic food once and I don't really like the taste of it. It just tastes weird to me comparing to Malay cuisine ..."

Compared to Malay cuisine, the respondent's perception towards organic food is considered negative. A possible explanation for this perception is that because they might have had negative experiences while dining at organic restaurants that they perceived had poor sensory quality. In order to increase consumers' confidence in organic food, the taste of the food has a significant impact on the consumers' experiences and their intention to re-purchase[24]. Although taste of food varies among different culture, in terms of consuming organic food in this study, respondents do not perceived taste as the primary motivator to consume organic food as they are more concerned about their health. This is consistent with the study by Jun et al (2014)[7]. where by they found that individuals who are more concerned about their health are more unlikely to consider taste as the influence on their organic food purchasing decision.

Willingness to Pay

High prices incurred with organic food has been seen as the most common obstacle for consumers to purchase organic food. Previous research regarding willingness to pay (WTP) for organic found that consumers' who perceived organic foods as healthier and safer have a higher willingness to pay when purchasing organic food[27]. From the focus group interview session, some of the respondents men-

tioned that they are willing to pay premium prices for organic products.

"... It is for my health. Why not..."

"... I am willing to pay for tasty organic food because I like the ingredients that they used are fresh ..."

"... Even when the price is high, since it is for my health I would still purchase organic ingredients ..."

These findings suggest that the respondents' places health as their priority because people who are concerned about the environment and are interested in their health are prepared to pay higher prices for organic food which they believe will enhance their personal health and well-being. The rise of academic levels and the access to the worldwide communication channels for consumers to be aware of health and environmental issues have driven a stronger demand and increase in the willingness to pay to adopt a healthier lifestyles[16].

"... My family buys it most of the time so I will eat when they did buy ..."

"... I don't feel the pricing influences my consumption of organic food because my family would go and eat once a week and it became a routine in my life ..."

Due to the changes in socio-demographics, younger generations will rely mostly on their family in order to have the chance to consume organic food. Such findings could be due to influences by third parties. Additionally, they find consuming organic food beneficial to their lifestyle. Therefore, they are willing to pay higher prices for organic products as consuming organic food slowly became a routine in life. This study is consistent with the study by Sharudin et al (2010)[2], where younger generations of consumers have higher intentions to pay premium prices for organic food as it is safer to be consumed.

On top of that, the concept of a buyer's willingness to purchase depends on four formulas referred to by 28 Friedman & Friedman (1990)[28] as a buyer's desire and his ability is interdependent on the buyer's willingness to buy. The four types of formulas,

also known as 'A Buyer's Multiview of Value' are (1) when consumer use their own money to purchase items for their own needs and wants; (2) when consumers are using their own money to spend on someone else (which includes friends and family members); (3) when consumers use someone else's money to purchase items which are for their own; and lastly (4) when someone else uses their money to spend on other people. These four formulas are crucial when consumers purchase organic food, they have to consider whose money they are spending. In this research, the respondents who eat organic with their family members are clearly using someone else's money to consume organic food. Therefore, they are willing to pay for the high prices of organic food. However, there are respondents from the focus group who revealed that consuming organic food took a toll on their budget due to the high price.

"... I will occasionally consume organic food but not that often due to my budget is quite tight and in my opinion the price for organic food is quite high ..."

Such response clearly signifies that they are using their own money to spend on their own and these groups of people are more cautious of the price variations. It is expected that price is one of the factors that influences people's intention to consume organic products. Reason for such findings could possibly be that conventional food prices are much lower and consumers might not take their health into consideration. Some consumers having difficulties in justifying the means of having to pay premium prices for organic products. Moreover, earlier studies have also showed that the prices are barriers for the organic market to grow among Malaysians especially for the lower-income group of consumers[29,30].

Family/Culture Influences

Eating patterns of a family can have important effects on their children's food consumption patterns [31]. Moreover, when a family places high importance of health and well-being of their family members, they are more likely to incorporate organic products into their daily menu to change their diet habits to secure the health of their family members

[11]. In Malaysia, there are different cultural beliefs in households that could influence their consumption of organic food. Most of the respondents from the focus group interview mentioned that the reason for consuming organic food is because of the influences from their family members and also their friends. In the Malay culture, their religion prohibits eating non-halal food items. Therefore, they most likely will go for organic food in order to widen their choices of food.

"... My culture does influence me because Asian diet has wide variety of meat and carbohydrates, so organic food allows me to have more choices in our daily cooking ..."

"... I'm influenced by my friends because after gym, we avoid going to mamak stalls (restaurants that sells Indian cuisine) and we will go to have organic food instead ..."

"... My parents' will occasionally bring us to have an organic meal to cleanse the food that we usually eat which are oily and high in fats such as Nasi Lemak and Rendang (Malay cuisine) ..."

Family plays a huge role in determining an individual's eating habits. This is because family's beliefs about which food item are healthy and their own dining experiences will have an impact to other family members or third parties' perception towards organic products[31].

"... I didn't like it before but because of my family keeps eating them, I got used to it now ..."

"... Some of my family member have some health issues so they influenced us to consume organic food once in a while ..."

Such findings imply that as people who are more concerned with their health will most likely to be much more aware of their food intake and hence, consume organic food.

"... One of my family member had cancer, which is why my family is all aware the importance of health and then we start to eat at organic

restaurants ..."

This implies that the health and family are inter-related. This finding suggests that the health of the respondent is not only a factor influencing the consumption of organic food, but also a factor influencing the health of the family. Although some of the respondents do not consider family influence as their main motivator to consume organic food, they will still dine with their family members once in a while. In a multiracial and multicultural country, Malaysia subjective norms, which includes family members' and friends' expectations, may influence individual's perceptions towards organic products. This is because consumers have different beliefs about certain things and in this case, organic products and family members, friends and even colleagues are strong referent points as they have different perceptions towards food, despite halal, non-halal and even organic[32]. Therefore, in Malaysia there are cultural differences which have an impact on the types of food served and methods of preparation of the dishes at home and in restaurants.

"... As Malays are restricted to eat pork, so my friends and I will go for organic food for more other varieties of food ..."

This finding suggests that organic food could trigger novelty experiences. Novelty refers to the perception of new things or experiences[33]. Given that the Malays are prohibited to consume certain types of foods due to their religious dietary law, the organic food market may shed a light on new dietary options that meet the dietary law for the Malay target group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an insight about the perceptions of organic food of the Malays and Chinese cultures in Malaysia; however, there are other races in the country that could be explored regarding their perceptions of organic foods that could enhance restaurant organic food offerings. There are also many factors that can be added or studied further by conducting research on all of the three top cultures in

Malaysia. Such studies would enable organic food-service providers to serve their restaurant patrons better. On top of that, such studies will increase the public awareness and knowledge in regards to organic products. Diabetes and obesity can be reduced in the country and organic food markets will have a boost with such a promising target group. Implications suggested in this study enable foodservice providers to better understand the different perceptions of the Malay and Chinese consumers and have a clearer idea of how to target the right customers by using more effective marketing tools. To top it all, organic restaurants need to understand consumers' needs and wants which eventually will lead to an economic boost in the food and beverage industry. This study is not free from limitations. A limitation for this study is the number of focus groups and the number of participants which was limited to 12 people, which was then further divided into 6 in each focus group. Due to time and budget constraints, the respondents were all from one area of Malaysia, which further limits this study to represent other parts of Malaysia. Moreover, different races have different opinions in regards to the factors influencing them to consume organic food and choose organic food in restaurants, which will then change the results. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for future studies to include other races in Malaysia, such as the Indian culture and also the Indigenous people with various demographic backgrounds that could provide a better insight of the organic food market in Malaysia.

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