

**SUSTAINABILITY IN FOOD PURCHASE DECISIONS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FACTORS INFLUENCING SUSTAINABLE
CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN PAKISTAN**

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Abstract:

The global COVID-19 pandemic has restricted the movement of people across the world and has necessitated consumers to approach their food purchase decisions with a resilient mindset. This study uses the qualitative approach to explore primary influences on the consumption of sustainable food products in Pakistan from the purchase-intention phase to the purchase-completion phase. This study also examines factors that prevent consumers from translating their purchase-intentions into actual purchases. In addition, this study investigates the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the purchase intention of consumers and the consumption of sustainable food products in Pakistan. The content analysis method has been used to extract themes from the data after interviewing 10 consumers of green food products. The findings of this study will help stakeholders such as marketers, suppliers and policy-makers understand factors that motivate consumers to purchase sustainable food products in Pakistan.

Keywords: resilient, purchase decisions, sustainable food, purchase-intention, purchase-completion

Introduction

The rapid development of technologies has on one hand resulted in booming businesses, economic growth and an overall change in the lives of consumers. On the other hand, it poses numerous challenges to the environment, including air pollution, climate change and global warming (Zhuang, Luo, & Riaz, 2021). Consequently, consumers who are environmentally conscious have begun to change choices in terms of their purchases and are gradually moving towards the consumption of green products (Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, Lobo, & Vu, 2019). Green products help protect the environment by conserving energy and eliminating wastages, pollution and emission of toxic substances (Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006). Green products can be recycled, reused and decomposed; therefore, they pose less risk to the environment and bring better living standards for consumers and the society (Zhuang, Luo, & Riaz, 2021).

A major source of achieving sustainability is through food production because it affects the environment, society and the economy. As an agricultural economy, Pakistan is moving towards placing proper checks and balances to improve the quality of food and public health by regulating food authorities in all provinces of the country. These authorities set standards, control quality and monitor certifications. These regulations are a reflection of the sustainable food consumption patterns and preferences of the consumers; however, the percentage of consumers who consider sustainability in their food purchase decisions remains low in Pakistan. Therefore, to understand the effectiveness of the green food market in Pakistan, it is essential to study the purchase behavior and purchase intentions of consumers in relation to green food consumption. This study will help researchers, marketers and consumers discover the motivating factors that shape consumers' intention to purchase green food products. Moreover, in the context of Pakistani market, there is a research gap when it comes to purchase intention of green food. As consumers are becoming aware of the green food products and leaning towards sustainable purchase decisions, companies are paying more attention to sustainable products and are considering environmental issues stemming from food production (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). Thus, this study will contribute towards bridging this research gap by studying sustainability in food purchase decisions in the context of Pakistan.

Over the past couple of years, food production and consumption have been a major source of global environmental degeneration (Garnett, 2008). With rapid increase in population, Pakistan is already suffering from shortage of resources. In addition, depletion of natural resources occurring from pollution and contamination of resources is leading to environmental calamities in the country. Consequently, it has become even more crucial to change the production patterns of businesses and consumption patterns of consumers.

It has been more than two years since the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. The virus has affected numerous businesses across various industries and has created a shift in the purchase habits of consumers. When it comes to the global food system, it has greatly been affected at various levels of supply chain from producers to consumers. Consumers are now opting for sustainable and healthier food options (Ben Hassen, El Bilali, & Allahyari, 2020). Since the span of the virus is unknown, consumers are preferring sustainable food products to increase their immunities. However, there is lack of research on sustainable food consumption and the limited numbers of studies that are available mostly focus on developed countries. There is minimal literature available on sustainability in food purchase decisions in the context of Pakistan. This study intends to cover this gap and explore sustainable consumer behavior in light of the concerns that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives of the study are to investigate the factors that motivate consumers to purchase green food and to explore the factors that prevent consumers from buying green food, even when they were intending to. Lastly, the study also aims to determine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable food consumption.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, protecting the environment has remained a critical debate across the world. In particular, the ecologically conscious consumers are concerned with guarding the environment and want to live a sustainable lifestyle (Menozzi, Sogari, Veneziani, Simoni, & Mora, 2017). In order to be harmonious with nature and to stay conscious of environmental concerns, consumers are making purchase decisions that will protect the environment (Worsely, Wang, & Burton, 2015). Considering that consumers are the target audience when it comes to developing strategies for green marketing, co operates are striving to understand and respond to the external pressures in order to improve their image (Peattie, 2001). They are doing this by making efforts to introduce products that are sustainable and environment-friendly. These products are commonly known as 'green products', 'sustainable products', 'ecological products' or 'environment-friendly products' (Sudiyanti, 2009).

One of the crucial sectors in sustainable product markets is the green food market segment (Laureti & Benedetti, 2018). The consumers' preference for sustainable food can actually be viewed as offering support to the agricultural sector, where environmental damage is far less than that of the industrial sector (McCarthy, Liu, & Chen, 2016). While controlling the use and emissions of harmful substances may be difficult for the industrial sector, the agricultural sector can limit and control the use of chemical products like

synthesized fertilizers, pesticides, growth regulators and other genetic engineering technologies (Liu, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2013).

According to (McCarthy, Liu, & Chen, 2016), purchase intentions of consumers for green food are motivated by altruistic concerns and self-interest. Altruistic concerns include animal welfare and environmental concerns, whereas self-interest includes concerns for personal welfare, family welfare, and food consumption safety. (Zhu, LI, Geng, & Qi, 2013) studied the influencing factors on consumers for green food purchases by applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and found that variables such as attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control have a significant impact on green food purchases. Numerous studies have discovered that personal characteristics such as age, gender, education, income and family size have an impact on green food purchase behavior.

There are times when the trend for green food consumption is found to be going upwards indicating consumer preference; however, it does not translate into sales. This situation is known as intention-behavior gap (IBG). Researchers have noted that there are some inconsistencies when it comes to consumers expressing their desires to purchase and consume green food products. For instance, 30-50% participants indicated the intention to purchase green products but only 5% of them actually purchased those products (Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). (Chekima, Chekima, & Chekima, 2019) and (Thogersen, 2010) have also noted these irregularities in other green product researches.

This study employs the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) that can be used to explain and often predict the behavior of consumers related to a certain context in a particular timeframe (Ajzen, 2020). According to this theory, the stronger the consumers' intention, the higher the likelihood of a particular behavior occurring. Generally, attitude is used to determine behavior; however, unanticipated occurrences such as lack of resources (financial or physical), lack of skills, health issues and several other factors can alter the behavior of people. If people gain the ability to overcome these barriers, then they can have actual control over their behaviors. The theory states that there are three determinants of behavioral intentions. The first determinant is attitude towards behavior, which is based on behavioral beliefs about likely consequences. The second determinant is the subjective norm regarding behavior, which includes injunctive (expectation) and descriptive (behavior of others) normative beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The third determinant is perceived behavioural control, which means that if control factors (skills and abilities, availability of resources and dependency on others) are present or missing, the outcome will either be facilitated or inhibited. Therefore, both personal and contextual factors can be the determinants for green food consumption (Tanner & Kast, 2003).

When the phenomenon of sustainability gained popularity, green food producers were not accustomed to labeling and marketing 'organic' food. However, with time and increasing

demand, they realized the importance of credible labels and marketing channels (Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002). (Zhu, LI, Geng, & Qi, 2013) discovered that environmental value plays a vital role in turning the green food purchase intention of consumers into an actual purchase behavior. It is the food culture coupled with how the population of a certain place shows concern for the environment that plays a key role in sustainable consumption (Thogersen, 2010). If citizens are concerned about air, water and food pollution, then environmental awareness will spread and better initiatives for sustainability will be taken (Li, et al., 2009). According to (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011), ecological citizenship is an important motivational force behind sustainable consumption behavior. (Zhu, LI, Geng, & Qi, 2013) emphasized that governmental efforts significantly influence green food consumption and includes initiatives like food safety supervision and policy-making on sustainable consumption. The facilitation of marketing channels by government and corporations is also a factor that leads to higher sustainable consumption.

According to (Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002), the major factors that act as hindrances to sustainable food consumption are cost, convenience, and availability. Consumers tend to analyze decisions based on tradeoffs of benefits versus costs to arrive at the decision-to-purchase organic food. With the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, all aspects of life were impacted across all sections of the societies. As countries went into lockdown for prolonged periods of time, consumption patterns across all industries began to see the consequences (Pulighe & Lupia , 2020). Studies have not only found changes in consumer preferences of food shopping (online or offline), but have also seen a shift in the types of food consumed at households as consumers are preferring plant-based food instead of meat-based food (Canello R. , Soranna, Zambra, Zambon, & Invitti, 2020). Before the pandemic, the food consumption patterns were diverse as many consumers used to shop for grocery items at least once a week and people used to dine out of homes quite frequently. However, the pandemic has promoted more interest in healthy-eating as consumers now prefer locally grown sustainable food (Filimonau, Vi, Beer, & Ermolaev, 2021).

Methods

This study follows the inductive method of research and is qualitative in nature. The descriptive phenomenology approach has been used to explore the perceptions of consumers regarding sustainable food consumption. Phenomenology refers to determining the meaning of a particular phenomenon for a group of individuals who have had some experience with that phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). This research explores the perceptions and experiences of green food consumers by determining the factors that influence their consumption patterns, the problems faced by them while making purchase decisions for

green food products, and the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable food consumption.

Non-probability purposeful sampling has been used to select respondents for this study. Interviews with ten participants were conducted, out of which 4 were males and 6 were females. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from consumers of green food products. An interview protocol was developed and sent to a domain expert for review. After receiving approval from the domain expert, the interviews were conducted from selected consumers of green food products. Respondents were first asked basic questions related to their demographic profiles. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted and respondents were asked about the critical factors that influenced their purchase decisions, the problems they faced while making purchase decisions of green food products, and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their consumption patterns. The average length of all inter views was approximately 35 minutes.

The content analysis method was used to analyze data. The gathered data was coded and a number of themes were extracted from the responses. The probing technique was used to obtain in-depth knowledge about consumers' intention-to-purchase green food products and to identify hindrances in sustainable food consumption. The data was then arranged into categories as per the identified themes to obtain insights.

4. Analysis and Results

A detailed analysis of data regarding sustainable food consumption was carried out by extracting themes and codes from responses of ten Pakistani consumers. The motivators behind green food consumption, problems associated with the purchase decision of green food, and the impact of COVID-19 on sustainable food consumption were explored.

Codes	Themes	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10
	Health benefits										
Social circle	Family influence		Parents focus on buying organic food	Family recommendation matter while making food			Parents and other family members help in making		Green food consumption is important because of old	Family endorses green food brands	
	Social environment	Colleagues recommendation matter in purchasing green food products			Friends and peers moving towards sustainable consumption in food items	Friends and fellow employees bringing green food for lunch at work		Dinning out regularly with friends at places offering green food			Peers recommendation of green food products inspire purchase decision
			Fitness and strength is very important in presenters	Healthy food choices reduces the chances of various health problems	Health benefits are numerous	More proteins and vitamins in green food consumption	Health food choices are important keeping in view the pandemic	Green food has health benefits compared to conventional food	More healthy and nutritious as compared to normal food items		

Environment responsibility	Better Quality	Taste and flavor
Sustainability		Taste buds are used to of organic food items
We are responsible to sustain the environment for future generations		
Better food choices can help sustain the environment		
Green food consumption is a sustainable consumption behavior		Taste and flavor is worth buying green products
		Green food items are favorable
	Better quality ingredients are used to produce green food items	
Sustainability in consumption behavior should be the main focus these days	Quality is important than quantity. Green foods always have better quality	

Pleasant buying experience		
Discounts and value deals	Guidance by sales person	Ambiance of shopping place
	The green food item section is separate from regular items and	
	Sales person play a very important role in guiding about new items	
	The guidance provided by sales people for new items in green food	
Deals and discounts on new sustainable food items		
Healthy food items at economical prices are		Enjoy shopping in a different environment
	Sales people convince and encourage purchase of organic	
Value deals on organic food items are vital		
	Sales person guidance and directions play an important role in making	
	Introduction of green food items by sales people influence the purchase	

Table 1: Factors affecting green food consumption

“I have long work hours and most of my colleagues are conscious about their food choices. They keep a balance of greens along with meat items in their lunches and snacks. Hence, I became highly influenced by their food ranges and started getting it for my family, especially my children.”

The other half of our respondents believed that their families had a major influence on their green food consumption. According to a respondent (R3):

“Most of my family members are now moving towards sustainable food consumption. In many family gatherings, the benefits of green consumption is discussed on a regular basis which has inspired me to move towards sustainable food items as well.”

There are numerous benefits of green food products. The majority of the respondents agreed that green food brings many health benefits. According to a respondent (R6):

“Every day I read about some new disease affecting even small children in Pakistan. I believe that unhealthy consumption of food since childhood leads to many problems in children and adults. The COVID-19 pandemic has also given me a reason to boost my immunity by making healthy food choices. Hence, I purchase green food items.”

Another respondent (R4) stated:

“I feel that organic food has more flavors as compared to traditional food. Many brands are emerging in Pakistan and hence there is now variety available in green food as well.”

Consumers were also found to be increasingly becoming conscious about their environment.

According to a respondent (R1):

“Buying green food products is important for a sustainable environment. We need to protect our future generations by making wise choices.”

Another respondent (R8) indicated:

“Growing green food is important. Not only production but distribution should also be done in recyclable material so as to protect the environment.”

Moreover, family dynamics were important factors explored in this study. The majority of the respondents living in nuclear families preferred organic food items. However, some of them preferred organic items for their grandparents or elders living with them. Some respondents declared that they purchased organic food items for their children only. According to a respondent (R5):

“My family consists of a large number of children who are growing. It is vital for them to have nutrients from real and green food consumption to ensure healthy nourishment of body and mind.”

The majority of our respondents believed that sales person at the point-of-purchase played a vital role in guiding and recommending healthy food products to consumers. According to a respondent (R10):

“I purchase green food items from one store only. The main reason is their support staff. The grocery store has very knowledgeable staff members who guide me and answer my questions regarding green food products very patiently. They also introduced me to new organic food items in store. This helps me make my purchase decisions.”

		Lack of awareness		
		Supplier awareness	Consumer awareness	Limited assortment
Trend of junk food			There is a lot of potential market in Pakistan for purchase of green food items but people are not aware of its benefits	
Youth in Pakistan prefer junk food every day			Level of awareness of environment friendly and green food product is low	
People consumer cold drinks and oily food in gatherings			Brands should focus on increasing awareness level of consumers	Variety and brands are limited
		Advertisements and promotion of organic products		
		Companies should add organic items in their product line. They should be aware of its health benefits		
Children are given unhealthy food since childhood			Benefits of green food consumption are confusing	Brands are very limited in Pakistan
Junk food consumption is very high in Pakistan			Lack of awareness in Pakistan	
			Consumers should be conscious about their food choices	
Millennials and Gen Z are a lot into junk Food items			Consumers are not aware of availability of green food items	
		The sales staff should know about ingredients and benefits of organic products		

	Dining out at traditional restaurants	Dining out at unhealthy places is common in Pakistan			Famous restaurants do not have green food menu	People usually think of traditional only and inorganic food items when planning a dine out			Unhealthy food places are preferred		Hardly anyone dines out at healthy restaurants. This can be because of high prices as well.
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Table 2: Hindrances preventing green food consumption

In Pakistan, the prices of green food products are high compared to regular food items (Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002). The majority of respondents indicated that although the benefits of green food products were immense, the prices were on the higher side as well. According to a respondent (R2):

“Green food items are although very healthy and nutritious, the prices are on the higher side compared to traditional food items. With the overall inflation in Pakistan, these items will gradually become out of range for a middle income class family.”

The variety of items and availability of green food in Pakistan are limited, which is a major barrier in when it comes to purchasing green food (Canello R., Soranna, Zambra, & Invitti, 2020). As per a respondent (R10):

“Very few supermarkets keep organic food items. The area where I live, the nearby supermarts do not keep such items. According to the shop keepers, the demand for such items is low and it is costly to stock them. Hence, I have to go to far off places to purchase these products. If I need something urgently, I have to rely on inorganic items because it is not possible for me to travel far on an urgent basis.”

The health benefits that can be derived from green food products are enormous. However, awareness level regarding sustainability is low in Pakistan (Tobler, Visschers, & Siegrist, 2011). Most people make unhealthy food choices because they have developed habits for eating particular types of food over the years. According to a respondent (R6):

"I have personally researched a lot on green food items. However, the benefits are still confusing. It is the responsibility of brands to ensure that the benefits of green items are discussed in daily advertisements and promotional activities in order to increase awareness in Pakistan."

Although friends and family can greatly influence an individual's decision to purchase green food products, there is a flip side of this influence. According to respondents, there is peer pressure to consume unhealthy food as well. People eat traditional food items while dining out with friends and family. According to a respondent (R9):

"Youngsters, mainly millennials and generation Z, eat junk food and inorganic items regularly. They are young and growing and do not care about health issues that they can face in the future."

Impact of COVID-19 on Sustainable Food Consumption

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected sustainable food consumption (Pulighe & Lupia, 2020). According to 70% of the respondents, the COVID-19 pandemic has positively influenced their food choices, prompting them to move towards healthier food purchases compared to pre-COVID times. According to a respondent (R6):

"Since the start of COVID-19, my family including my parents talked about the importance of boosting immune systems to survive COVID-19. Since then, we have been searching for organic items for the entire family."

Another respondent (R7) indicated:

"Because green products are considered to have more health benefits, COVID-19 has influenced me to prefer them for daily use. These items are no doubt expensive but nothing is important than one's health."

On the other hand, 10% of the respondents indicated that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their sustainable food consumption, while 20% stated that COVID-19 had no impact on their consumption patterns. According to a respondent (R9):

"COVID-19 has negatively affected the overall economy. The future is very uncertain and we are not sure what will happen next. The lockdown led to closure of many businesses and hence purchasing power reduced further. COVID-19 has reduced the consumption of green food items as they are very expensive."

According to another respondent (R1):

"My family has been purchasing green food items since a long time. COVID or no COVID, we purchase green food items only since we like their taste. My extended family also consumes green food items and after experiencing the benefits of green food, we are not willing to go back to traditional food choices."

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study identifies the primary influences on the consumption of sustainable food products from the phase of purchase-intention to the phase of purchase-behavior. The study discovered that during the phase of intention-generation, the factors that encourage sustainable food consumption are social influence, perceived product benefits (health benefits, taste and quality), sense of responsibility towards the environment, family structure, and pleasant shopping experiences, which include ambiance, guidance by salespeople, and availability of discounts and value deals. On the other hand, the factors that prevent consumers from translating their purchase-intentions into actual purchases are high prices of sustainable food products, limited purchasing power of Pakistani consumers, limited availability of green food products at stores, limited options to choose from, lack of awareness about sustainable food products in consumers as well as suppliers, and peer pressure stemming from junk food trend and consumers' preference for dining out at traditional restaurants.

This study is one of the first ones to have investigated the impact of COVID-19 on consumers' purchase intention and consumption of sustainable food products. This study will also help stakeholders such as marketers, suppliers and policy-makers to understand factors that motivate consumers to purchase sustainable food products in Pakistan. Thus, policy-makers can use this study as a foundation to formulate sustainable policies and strategies. This study employed the qualitative approach in which a limited number of participants were interviewed. A quantitative research with a larger sample to confirm the results of this study can be conducted in the future. Moreover, it is suggested that future research on sustainability in food purchase decisions should include diverse groups from different backgrounds to obtain a broader view of the population. In addition, this study is based on general investigation of sustainable food consumption, whereas in the future, specific factors contributing to green food consumption can be studied. Particular segments of the society may be compared to understand the variation in purchase patterns or a particular product may be investigated in future researches in the context of sustainability. It may be worth noting that the impact of COVID-19 pandemic may change with time and future research may be based on post-COVID-19 consumption patterns of consumers.

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