

# **PURCHASE INTENTION AND BARRIERS FOR ORGANIC FOOD CONSUMPTION POST-COVID-19: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI ORGANIC CONSUMERS**

## **SIDRA ABID\***

Univesiti Sains Malaysia, Main Campus, Penang, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding Author Email: sidra\_hasib@yahoo.com

## **Dr. KAKUL AGHA**

Associate Professor, Skyline University College, UAE.

## **SARWAT JAHAN**

Faculty of Business and Accountancy, Lincoln University College, Main Campus, Wisma Lincoln, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

## **TAJWAR HUSSAINI**

Assistant Professor, Manipal Academy, Dubai Academic City, UAE.

### **Abstract**

This qualitative study aims to investigate underlying factors impacting organic food consumption about purchasing intention and intention behaviour gap. It evaluates the impact of COVID-19 on organic food purchases and is based on grounded theory. Data collection was done through 24 in-depth interviews with respondents in Pakistan. This study revealed that health consciousness, environmental concern, are significant drivers for motivating consumers for organic buying intention. However, premium prices, lack of availability, lack of certifications, and insufficient knowledge are the reasons causing the barriers to the purchase of organic food. This research adds value to the studies on buying intentions for organic food concerning Pakistani consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implications of the study are related to marketer's policy makers.

**Keywords:** Organic Food, Health Consciousness, Environmental Concern, Purchase Intention, Barriers, COVID-19, Pakistani Organic Market

### **1. Introduction**

This study is based in Pakistan, and its objective is to determine the elements that inspire consumers to purchase organic food, as well as the ones that contribute to the obstacles to purchasing organic foods. The present study investigates the influence of COVID-19 on the buying intention of organic food consumers. The research is qualitative and based on the principles of grounded theory. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 24 respondents who are consuming organic food. Open and axial coding is done to find out the reason for purchasing and not purchasing organic food. According to the results of axial

coding health consciousness, environmental concerns are the primary motivating factors that encourage the consumer to purchase organic food, premium prices, lack of availability, lack of certifications and insufficient knowledge are the key factors that hinder the consumer intention related to organic food. The study results provide information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the consumer purchase intentions for organic food. The study's managerial implications enable marketers to build marketing tactics that persuade individuals to choose a healthy lifestyle that includes organic food consumption. The study is also beneficial for policymakers as the results will support them to understand the importance and value of natural foods in the overall well-being of the society, owing to which policy makers can promote local businesses in organic farming and cultivation by giving the farmers subsidies and other incentives.

## 2. Review of Literature

In the current era, ecological deterioration is creating a negative impact on people's life. Economic evolution, urbanization, and mechanization are primary reasons for over-consumption among humans. Excessive consumption of resources is becoming the root cause of environmental problems such as depletion of natural resources, ozone layer, and health risks(Akbar et al., 2019).The rise in environmental issues and their negative impacts on human and ecological health necessitates consciousness among consumers about their consumption patterns, particularly in terms of food(Blaise et al., 2020).

Nguyen et al., (2019) stated that innovative ways are being adopted to meet supply and demand for food to meet the growing demand. The main focus is on enhancing efficiency, i.e. getting maximum output with little input. For this purpose, farmers adopted battery farming methods, whereas many animals are packed into unnatural growing pens requiring minimum human inputs. The application of animal feed additives such as proteins helps animals grow faster and become more robust. Implementation of innovative but harsh practices is becoming the cause of environmental damage, manipulation of natural fertilization cycles, and health hazards. Due to the prevailing reasons, organic food consumption has seen phenomenal growth in the recent past(Wang et al., 2019).

Organic food is manufactured by adopting natural cultivation methods and techniques. These methods are identified as ecological and biological agriculture as well. These techniques are an amalgamation of traditional and modern farming technologies(Eyhorn et al., 2019). Sadiq et al. (2020)revealed that organic food manufacturing can be explained as a farming method in which food production is done without harmful chemicals and artificial fertilizers. Though organic farm shows lower yields than conventional farm production still the benefits associated with natural farming are high on the sustainability matrix(Lucian, 2017).Individuals are becoming more civilized and sophisticated these days, and prefer to use traditional methods for the cultivation of crops. As a result, demand for organic food and organic farming is rising. The concept of organic eating is well established in advanced nations due to the majority of available literature on organic food purchasing intentions and consumption is from the viewpoint of developed countries (Yadav et al., 2019). In developing countries like Pakistan, the concept is still emerging, where approximately 20% of the

country's GDP is generated through the agriculture sector. Despite being an agricultural-centric state, the organic food consumption in Pakistan is relatively low, demonstrating the presence of specific inhibitions or difficulties faced by individuals(Akbar et al., 2019).

To comprehend consumers' intention to purchase, it is critical to grasp the variables that contribute to the organic food market's growth. (Wang et al., 2019). The academicians and marketers need to acknowledge which factors stimulate people's purchase intention for organic food consumption and which factors stop consumers from the purchase of organic food. Subsequently, scholars should minimize the gap by exploring the factors that impede consumers from converting their intention to practice(Moser and Moser, 2015).In Pakistani contexts, research on purchase intention and barriers to organic food consumption is pretty much limited. As the concept of eating green is still at an early stage of development due to this little scholarly work is available. The emergence of COVID-19has expressively impacted food production and consumption patterns worldwide(Galali, 2021). People's eating and dietary habits have been altered drastically with the progression of the corona virus pandemic. The pandemic crisis has shifted people from consuming conventional food to healthier and safer food options(Marty et al., 2020).

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on people's purchase intention and behaviour is still in the emerging stage. None of the studies focused on the impact of COVID-19 on organic food consumption, particularly in the Pakistani context. Thus, the present qualitative survey with open-ended questions helps examine the underlying factors that motivate and demotivate the consumers for the purchase of organic food. Since people's eating habits are changing due to COVID-19, it is critical to study variations in Pakistani consumers' attitudes and behaviour towards organic food consumption.

Based on the literature review, the present study asks three research questions:

RQ1: What are the factors that motivate consumers to purchase organic food?

RQ2: What are barriers that hinder consumers from the purchase of organic food?

RQ3: What is the impact of COVID-19 on organic food consumption among Pakistani consumers?

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study was exploratory and qualitative with the goal of identifying factors that influence purchase intent and barriers to organic food consumption in Pakistan. The data of the research is based on the Strauss a grounded theory approach. A study by Alammari et al., (2019) informs that in the Strauss a method, after doing the open coding, the researcher starts axial coding. In this type of coding, the data collected is put back together in novel ways by coding around the axis; the connections between the categories get established by applying mapping and diagrams. Relationship and hypothesis are proposed deductively at this stage and verified in contrast to data and classes. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were

conducted. The respondents were asked to answer the open-ended question to understand organic food consumption better.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The target population for the present study is individuals who purchased organic food in the recent past. The interviews were conducted and recorded with 24 organic food consumers from Karachi, a city located in Pakistan. According to Waqas and Hong (2019), the demand for organic food consumption in big cities of Pakistan such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Multan is increasing compared to the smaller towns. Though prima facie, the study reflects entire Pakistan for convenience, it is limited only to Karachi city for data collection. The accessible population is the residents of Karachi city. The theoretical sampling method employed for sample selection and in-depth interviews were conducted through the online meeting tool, Zoom. The proposed period of interviews was approximately 20-25 mins. The researcher requested the respondents to continue with the interview only if they had purchased organic food in the recent past. Three core topics discussed during interviews were factors that motivate consumers for organic food purchase intention, factors causing barriers in terms of organic food consumption, and impact of COVID-19 on organic food consumption. The questions used in this study were identified through intense and rigorous literature review. Respondents informed that their personal information and data need not be revealed to anyone.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents**

Demographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	25	71.4%
	Male	10	28.6%
Age	20-30	8	22.8%
	30-40	20	57.2%
	40-50	7	20%
Marital Status	Married	20	57.2%
	Single	10	28.6%
	Divorced	5	14.2%
Educational Background	High School Certificate	6	17.1%
	Bachelor's	12	34.2%
	Master's	15	42.8%
	PhD	2	5.9%
Monthly Income (RS)	15,000-35,000	5	14.2%
	35,0000-55,000	5	14.2%
	55,0000-75,000	20	57.2%
	75,0000-100,0000	5	14.2%

### 3.3 Data Analysis

According to the grounded theory, data coding is based on open, axial, and selective coding. The coding of data was complete by implementing the paragraph to paragraph approach. According to this approach, an audio transcript of each participant was then converted into set sections. These paragraphs were matched the literature ideas (Presmeg and Kilpatrick, 2019). Altogether, investigators identified 6 codes, out of which 2 were from the factors motivating consumers for organic buying intention and 4 from the elements that cause the barriers. Once the open coding was complete, the data was analyzed to form common themes for creating axial codes. The central concept of axial coding is to organize open codes into categories closely related to open codes, and axial coding requires both inductive and deductive thinking (Williams and Moser, 2019). The present study has 6 axial codes, and table 2 represents all open and axial codes.

**Table 2: Open and Axial Codes**

Open Codes	Extracts from Interview	Axial Codes
<b>Factors motivating for organic food Purchase</b>		
Self Help Awareness	I'm very conscious about what I eat as my health represent what I consume	<b>Health Consciousness [1]</b>
Free from toxic chemicals / Hygiene	Buying organic food makes me feel good as I know what I'm eating is hygienic and does not contain any artificial nourishment.	
Health concern	I'm very much concerned for the well-being of my family and because of this, I usually purchase organic food.	
It does not harm the environment	Organic food is prepared by using practices that are ecologically friendly, so I prefer to buy it as it is not creating a negative impact on the environment	<b>Environmental Concern [2]</b>
Connectedness to Nature	Purchasing organic food makes me feel that I'm close to nature and playing my role in protecting it from further damages.	
<b>Barriers for organic food purchase intention</b>		
Price problem / costly	Organic food is not budget-friendly it is expensive in comparison with conventional food, despite knowing	<b>High price [A]</b>

	the benefits of organic eating I still prefer to buy traditional food due to price constraint	
It is not easily accessible/available only in big cities	Only big supermarkets are keeping organic food small and near buy stores do not keep being a consumer, it is difficult for me to go far places to purchase it.	<b>Lack of availability [B]</b>
No authenticity of the certification	There is no proper certification for the authenticity of the organic food and this makes me conscious from purchasing it.	<b>Lack of certifications[C]</b>
No awareness	I don't want to buy expensive organic food items when I'm not sure about the certifying bodies.	
	I am not aware of the benefits of consuming organic food and due to this I never show interest in buying it.	<b>Lack of Knowledge[D]</b>
It's a new word	The word organic food is new to me I don't know how it is good for me and my health.	

### Axial Code 1: Health Awareness

In the words of Chekima et al., (2017), health consciousness is defined as individuals' complete orientations towards health rather than issue-specific directions. Well-being concern is one of the primary drivers for encouraging people for buying organic food. Consumers who are highly aware of their health are considered loyal buyers of organic food. People with an urge for self-health awareness are the ones who always show positive buying intentions towards organic food (McMorrow et al., 2017). Organic food is free from toxic chemicals, artificial fertilizers, pesticides, and is considered a healthy and hygienic option of eating. People show a positive attitude toward purchasing organic food as it is clean and is believed to be safe for health(Bai et al., 2019). People having respect for their well-being develop a favourable attitude toward organic food purchase intention(Kushwah et al., 2019). Some participants mentioned that they are very conscious of their well-being as they firmly believe that their health represents what they consume. Few of the respondents said that since organic food is hygienic and free from toxic chemicals, they are motivated to buy it. In contrast, other participants mentioned that organic foods are often seen as a healthier alternative to traditional food products and that is the reason they are having a positive attitude in purchasing them.

## Axial Coding 2: Environmental Concern

Environmental consciousness refers to the extent to which individuals are aware of environmental problems and support efforts to resolve them. Chekima et al., (2017) articulate that consumers' concern regarding the environment forces them to adopt ethical practices in consumption that positively impact the environment. Consumers are showing a positive attitude toward organic food purchase as they know it is manufactured by adopting eco-friendly agriculture practices which are safe for the environment (Yadav et al., 2019). People having an emotional attachment to nature are optimistically inclined to consume organic food (Dong et al., 2020). Participants said that since organic food is not harmful to the environment, they prefer to buy it. Some respondents stated that purchasing organic food provides them with a sense of connection to nature, and as a result of this connection, they prefer to purchase environmentally friendly food.



**Word cloud for a most common word in describing purchase intention for organic food consumption**

## Barriers for organic food purchase

Four open codes were established from the participants as factors averting consumers from converting their intention into organic food purchasing actions. Four themes for axial codes emerged after reanalyzing the data: high price, lack of availability, lack of certification, and insufficient knowledge.

## Axial Coding A: High Price

Consumers' reactions to the price of organic goods are susceptible. Buyers may not focus on environmental friendliness or health concerns when purchasing a commodity because the price has substantial impact on individuals purchasing decisions. People are often deterred from being good ecological citizens due to price-related barriers. Yadav et al., (2019) explain high prices as the primary purchasing obstacle for organic food purchasers. Though the consumers are aware of the perks of consuming organic food due to price constraints, they still prefer to purchase non-organic food. According to respondents, the high price of organic

food compared to conventional food is the primary barrier; as a result, buyers cannot purchase it. Respondents indicated that they lost their jobs and even saw their salaries reduced during the pandemic, and as a result, they are not in a financial position to pay high prices for organic food.

#### **Axial Coding B: Lack of Availability**

Product availability is critical. People are hesitant to purchase products that are located far from their homes, particularly during the COVID-19 period, when there were movement restrictions. Consumers prefer to get their normal groceries from closed stores. A majority of customers are reluctant to buy from different shops as they prefer to buy things from a single shop only. McMorrow et al. (2017), explored that availability issues related to organic food consumption are considered as one of the severe barriers to purchase decision, as people are willing to buy things that are easily accessible. Organic items are scarce and difficult to obtain, so people lack interest in buying them. Participants mentioned that only big supermarkets sell organic foods that are also limited to vegetables and fruits only, in Karachi. None of the nearby stores sell organic foods and travelling a distance to procure such foods is considerably difficult for them.

#### **Axial Coding C: Lack of Certifications**

Certifications serve as verification of the product's authenticity. Individuals are unwilling to purchase products that are not certified by any certifying body. In developing countries, the government places less emphasis on the importance of product certification. Lack of certification is highlighted as an important impediment to people's desire for organic products. In the words of Torres-Ruiz et al., (2018) the absence of certifications creates product uncertainty among consumers. As a result, it is regarded as a significant barrier to purchasing organic food. The respondents indicated categorically that because no certifications are demonstrating the legitimacy of organic products, they have no urge to purchase them.

#### **Axial Coding D: Insufficient Knowledge**

Lack of knowledge and limited awareness regarding organic products are considered key barriers in purchasing organic food. Many consumers have not considered purchasing organic food since they did not know about it. The consumer's preference for organic food is contingent upon their level of knowledge. Inadequate knowledge and information are often cited as a significant obstacle to purchasing organic food (Padel & Foster, 2005). Pakistani respondents stated that insufficient knowledge is an important reason for not purchasing organic food. Organic food markets are limited in Pakistan and customers have no understanding of what an organic product is and how it is different from non-organic products. Due to a lack of knowledge, people are hesitant to purchase organic items.



organic food buying intention due to a rise in well-being and immunity concerns. The study result depicts that due to COVID-19, consumers are getting more health-conscious, owing to which they have a positive attitude toward the purchase of organic food. Participants show that COVID-19 does not impact the purchase of organic food.

Moreover, participants were asked another investigating question regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the barriers related to organic food purchase intention. Near about 72.46% of respondents narrated that the pandemic had negatively impacted their organic food buying intention.

For inaccessibility issues, participants conveyed that "despite having a positive intention for purchase of organic food, they were unable to buy it because during lockdown period movement was restricted and it was difficult for them to go out and buy it." The supply of organic eatable items was less at the nearby stores, and going to big stores that were located far away was impossible. Participants reported that due to COVID-19, they became more "price-sensitive as their salaries got deducted. It becomes difficult for them to purchase expensive items and they prefer to buy budget-friendly food items."

Respondents stated that despite being health concerned during COVID-19 time, still they are not interested in purchasing organic food products. This is because they are unsure of the regulatory bodies, as organic products lack certifications related to the product's authenticity. "I am well aware of the benefits of organic food intake and I know that developing a good immune system is mandatory in pandemic time, but still I m hesitant to purchase it because there is no official certification authority.

Participants mentioned that even after COVID-19, they still have insufficient knowledge about the perks associated to consumption of organic food, and because of this they are not interested in buying it.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study attempted to explore the factors influencing purchase intention of organic foods. A majority of customers said that they wanted to buy organic food because they were concerned about their health, as "health consciousness" is considered the most closely linked concept to organic food. Health benefits are the key motivator for consumers to select organic eatables. Consequently, when persuading customers to purchase organic food products, marketers and suppliers should make health benefits the primary focus.

In this research, environmental consciousness emerged as a critical factor. Purchasing organic food was seen as a pro-environmental action that could have long-term benefits and better future directions. Environmental apprehension has a beneficial and vigorous effect on consumers' desire to buy organic food. As a result, marketers, and policymakers should ensure that customers are aware of the environmental benefits.

Furthermore, most consumers in this study had optimistic attitudes toward organic food, although the findings show that barriers related to organic food consumption play a significant role in creating a purchase intention gap.

High prices, unavailability, lack of certifications, and insufficient knowledge have been described as significant barriers for consumers making purchase decisions for organic food items. Price is regarded as the most important factor in preventing consumers from turning their intentions into purchasing behaviour. High prices of organic food have the most decisive negative impact on the consumer's final buying decision. It is advised that the government should introduce appropriate policies and strategies to lower the cost of organic food products, making them more appealing and affordable to customers. For example, the government can introduce preferential policies such as monetary aids and tax breaks for relevant businesses engaged in producing, processing, and selling organic food. The marketers and suppliers can minimize costs and increase effectiveness by implementing smart supply chains, scientific procurement management systems, and modern network marketing channel strategies.

Although the organic food market has existed in Pakistan for a long time, unavailability problems still play a role in causing a barrier in organic food consumption. Organic food is not readily available in all cities of Pakistan. It is recommended to increase the supply of organic food items in supermarkets and the local community shops. Online sales are an excellent way to increase the supply of organic foods, so marketers can use the internet to its maximum potential to increase green food consumption. The government should establish additional certification bodies since these organizations assist consumers in developing trust in a product. Apart from this, the government could launch awareness programs to increase public awareness of organic food. In terms of COVID-19's effect, most consumers said that the pandemic had prompted them to buy more green foods due to their rising health concerns. Respondents' views on health and risk were affected by the pandemic crisis, which modified consumer sensitivity and values, resulting in a rise in organic food consumption. However, these increased intentions did not surge the amount of organic food purchased at the end. Despite having high purchasing intentions, organic food purchases have decreased during the COVID-19 outbreak due to unavailability, lack of certification, knowledge, and high prices.

Lack of supply of organic foods during the COVID-19 outbreak is considered a significant factor in limiting consumers' organic food purchases. Some consumers became more price-sensitive during the pandemic time, and their demand for organic food declined. Lack of certifications and knowledge is also regarded as the essential issue in limiting consumers' organic food purchases. By keeping the current challenges, the organic industry should first conduct a thorough analysis and establish realistic measures to solve the pandemic supply and demand issues for green food. The organic industry must ensure the availability and affordability of organic food purchases for customers. In particular, Internet shopping and food delivery systems could be extended and partnered with well-known e-commerce sites (Food panda and Hum mart). Increasing attractiveness in the organic food industry suggests developing low-cost pricing strategies, improving distribution networks, and enhancing promotional capabilities along with the issuing of certificates from authentic regulatory bodies and enlightening the consumers with organic food knowledge by promotional advertisements campaigns.

Furthermore, this study results may have some theoretical implications for the theory of planned behaviour whose constructs are easily affected by pandemic outcomes; researchers should consider moderating or mediating effects of COVID-19 for organic food purchase intention.

## Conclusion

The current qualitative research identifies the critical factors that encourage or dejects consumers for the consumption of organic food. The study identifies health awareness, environmental consciousness are vital features in raising organic food consumption among consumers premium organic food prices, unavailability issues, lack of knowledge, and certification are established as significant barriers to consumers converting their organic food intentions towards purchasing behaviour. Furthermore, this is one of those remarkable studies that probe into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumers' purchasing habits for organic food items, revealing current issues and potentially pointing to a brighter future for the Pakistan organic food industry. The results above will help stakeholders better understand the underlying facts and concerns about organic food purchases. The results can help in shaping future policy and industrial actions in Pakistan that encourage organic consumption. Certain limitations are there, which should be noted as prospective research objectives. This study used an interview-based qualitative approach, which restricted the number of participants to 24 only. People without internet access were omitted due to the use of an online recruitment process, so the results cannot indicate a significant population. Future research studies should concentrate on more diverse groups of respondents from varying backgrounds. The current research focused on one city i.e. Karachi and therefore future researchers can cover other parts of the country to get a deeper understanding of the concept. A quantitative survey with a good sample size may be used in future research to empirically verify the variables that play significant roles in Pakistani food markets. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on organic food consumption can change with time. However, future scholars must research the impact of the aftermath of COVID-19 to provide more conclusive data analysis and findings based on responding to pandemic influence on organic food consumption.

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