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Understanding Moroccan Consumers' Perceptions of Organic Products: A Qualitative Exploration and Empirical Model Proposal

Samir Labiad*

PhD student at the National School of Business and Management, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tangier, Morocco, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2185-5574>

Saida Marso

Full professor at the National School of Business and Management, Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tangier, Morocco, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4945-9103>

***Correspondence email:** samir.labiad1@gmail.com.

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Abstract: Organic foods continue to gain popularity in emerging markets. Like other developing economies, Morocco is following the pattern of developed markets in adopting organic food consumption. This research aimed to explore the consumer perception of organic foods in Morocco, listing the qualitative issues associated with their consumption, to develop an empirical model for a quantitative evaluation. A purposive sampling method was applied to recruit 20 participants from various shopping areas in Casablanca, people who had at least consumed organic foods in the past three-month period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants during face-to-face meetings, and with others conducted

remotely. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed, then subjected to thematic analysis. The theory of goal-directed behavior aided the study to observe that Moroccans perceive organic foods as being of high quality and chemical-free. They believe the foods are good for personal health, preventing chronic diseases, and for ecological sustenance. Organic foods, to Moroccans, are natural and authentic. They are motivated to purchase the foods to maintain health, feel proud, and identify with their social circles. Conversely, the limited supply of food, high pricing, inadequate information, and in some cases, discriminatory social norms discourage them from purchasing. The study's findings provide an in-depth qualitative exploration of Morocco, an under-researched growing market, thus contributing to the understanding of consumer psychology toward organic products. For practice, the research offers diagnostic insights to policymakers and marketers to design appropriate awareness campaigns and improve accessibility to promote consumer trust through certification and product labeling. However, owing to the small sample size used in the study and the delimitation to Casablanca, the researchers recommend an expanded study, widening the coverage to the national level, with a larger sample. The proposed model sets the foundation for the quantitative validation of the national results.

Keywords: Organic Foods (OFs), goal-directed behavior, purchase desire, purchase intention.

Introduction

Organic Foods (OFs), generally believed to be grown without the use of synthetic chemicals (Kumar et al., 2023; Sharma & Singhvi, 2018), continue to experience increasing demand with the passage of time. Most notably, consumers in developed countries have embraced the OFs, citing health concerns, safety, and environmental friendliness (Kumar et al., 2023). The United Nations Organic Food Global Market Report posited that pesticides and synthetic chemicals in conventional foods were potential promoters of birth defects, hormonal imbalances, and various types of cancers in humans (Kumar et al., 2023). The report approximated that globally, about 200,000 people die annually from consuming the toxins of chemicals in food.

The global OFs demand peaked in 2019, particularly in the developed world, with the USA, the European Union, and China collectively accounting for 42, 29, and 8 percent of the world's OFs market (Kumar et al., 2023). The growth rate of the OFs market was projected at 9.7 percent to reach US\$221.37 billion in the year 2021, up from US\$201.77 billion in 2020, given the COVID-19 awakening to a healthy lifestyle. Moreover, the post-pandemic consumption of OFs was projected to grow at a 14.5% compounded rate to reach a record high of US\$380.84 trillion in 2025.

Researchers have attempted to explain the reasons for the growth in demand for organic foods. Chetioui et al. (2023) observed a steady growth in the production of OFs in Western countries during the pre-COVID-19 period. Zuzek et al. (2023) observed that this similar trend in the Eurozone in the period 2012 to 2019 was the result of increased concern for the environment.

Moreover, the Eurozone countries like Croatia, Bulgaria and Latvia continued to record rapid growth in the demand and supply of the products. However, Chetioui et al. (2023) assert that the COVID-19 pandemic somehow aroused the developing countries to prefer OFs over conventional food. Saudi cities, for example, provided evidence for customer-perceived values favoring the uptake of organic foods (Nguyen et al., 2023). At least, according to Kumar et al. (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic aroused global consumers' awareness of the impact of diet on health.

Generally, the consumer preference for OFs is influenced by their health consciousness, their knowledge level, the availability and ease of access to OFs, the consumer perception of price, and the prevailing subjective norms (Gundala & Singh, 2021). Price, consumer age, and knowledge were highly predictive factors in the USA, according to them. Argue that the UK and Polish consumers had a high regard for environmental conservation, driving their desire for responsible consumption. In this regard, they preferred the OFs despite the limited availability and high pricing.

Research Problem

The research on the uptake and consumption of organic foods reveals varying concern factors among regions, alongside some similarities. While in some regions, the consumers were more concerned with their personal health and psychological influences of the products, in some regions, the consumers treated environmental concerns with the highest regard. One thing agreed across the board is that organic foods are beneficial and highly admired by consumers nearly everywhere across the globe. However, there are different talking points, thus making it difficult to make a universal conclusion about the products. Furthermore, the methodologies of research were varying and chosen for the convenience of the researchers, thus not giving a standardized way to compare results and make generalized conclusions. This study thus seeks to draw specific evidence for the Moroccan market by applying a theoretical approach that promotes the understanding of the behavior of Moroccan consumers.

Additionally, studies have predominantly focused on developed economies with established markets. The emerging markets have often come second in the establishment of OFs' presence and emphasis. This study thus sought to add to the few studies focusing on emerging markets by providing the specific evidence of the state of practice in Morocco. The study's objective is to explore the motivations, trends, and barriers that exist as they relate to organic product uptake in the country. A qualitative approach was applied to list the issues to establish the dynamics of the organic food market in this emerging country, to recommend a model for a further quantitative evaluation of the situation.

The choice of Morocco for this study is informed by a number of reasons, including: First, the organic food market displays a promising growth in consumer interest in healthy and environmentally-friendly food products. Secondly, Morocco has adequate land to promote organic farming. Actually, over the recent decades, the country has invested a lot in structured initiatives to develop organic farming, especially through research, training, and providing support programs to the stakeholders in the sector. The country's development agenda, under

the Vision 2030 flagship, presents an ambitious plan to advance organic agriculture and, through creating specialized support institutions, to promote the image of the country on the continental map of agriculture. Furthermore, the international recognition of the 'Bio-Maroc' label on the global platform continues to communicate a growing organic food orientation, which thus prompts this research to explore the nature, influencers, and detractors of organic food consumption.

Despite the notable advances in the uptake of organic food consumption, there still persist challenges with public awareness, availability of organic foods, and price competitiveness. The study aims to establish the extent of these and any other challenges to recommend mitigation, seeking to stimulate the growth of organic food uptake in Morocco. The study contributes to expanding the existing literature on organic food consumption by providing extensive evidence in the context of Morocco. The findings will provide situational analysis to inform stakeholders and policymakers on the strongholds and the necessary action points to improve organic food production and market in Morocco and similar emerging markets.

Research Focus

The study investigates how Moroccan consumers perceive organic food products, more especially, their motivations, the perceived barriers, and their behavioral intentions regarding organic consumption. The study draws from the theory of planned behavior (TPB), the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), and the theory of Goal-Directed Behavior (GDB), focusing on the socio-cultural and information dynamics that influence consumers' decisions in the context of emerging markets. Casablanca, Morocco, made a suitable case study, given its rising consumer adaptation to organic food consumption.

Research Aim

The study aimed to qualitatively explore consumers' experiences and perceptions of organic foods in Morocco, to develop an empirical model to test consumer behavior toward organic foods in emerging markets.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this exploration were:

1. What are the main motivations for Moroccan consumers towards purchasing organic foods?
2. What barriers do consumers perceive in accessing, purchasing or consuming organic foods?
3. How do health concerns, social norms, and emotions influence the purchase intentions of organic food consumers in Morocco?
4. What variables hold significant influence to make an empirical model for the quantitative evaluation of organic food consumption behavior in emerging markets?

Literature Review

Theories of Consumer Behavior as related to organic products consumption

Consumer behavior is defined by how consumers allocate their income and how they spend their money (Priyanath & Dangalla, 2022). Understanding consumer behavior helps with learning the consumer tastes and preferences, thus helping with appropriate policy formulations. However, consumer behavior may be a complex subject given different consumer backgrounds, characteristics and influencers. This study thus applied some established theories of consumer behavior to underscore the motivations, beliefs and attitudes of the Moroccan consumers toward organic foods. The theories that aided this endeavor were the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and the Goal-Directed Behavior theory.

Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and the Goal-Directed Behavior (GDB)

This theory, developed in the 1960s by Fishbein and Ajzen, forms part of the cognitive behavior models that attempt to explain the consumer's beliefs and attitudes towards products. According to the theory, the consumer's intention to consume a product is informed by their attitude and subjective norms toward the product (Bray, 2008).

Behavioral Intension = Attitude toward a behavior (AB) + Subjective Norms (SN)

For this case, the attitude toward organic products explores the consumer's beliefs toward the foods as relates to the perception of quality, health benefits, environmental impact, and other factors, evaluating whether the consumer's attitude is positive or negative. The subjective norms, on their end, assess the potential external social influences on the consumer's decisions about organic foods. The social norms are an array of social circles, including family, peer influence, societal norms, and the social media influence on consumption. Social norms recognize the power of influence from the external circles on a person's behavior; however, it is moderated by the degree to which the consumer is willing to comply with the external influence (Bray, 2008). This theory has been vindicated by empirical studies, proving that there exists a strong correlation between attitudes and subjective norms to behavioral intentions (Bray, 2008; Manuere et al., 2022). However, the theory is criticized for assuming that the consumer is overtly rational in decision-making; thus, it was modified into the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

The TPB improves the weakness of the TRA by adding the perceived behavioral control variable (Bray, 2008). It stipulates that the consumer's overall attitude is informed by their feelings and beliefs about a product. Priyanath and Dangalla (2022) confirm that the consumer's behavior is subject to the intention to perform a specified action. Moreover, the consumer's intentions are the immediate antecedents to behavior and subject to motivations, cognitive and internal processes affecting a person's actual behavior (Donahue, 2017). In totality, the TPB explains the existing factors that may facilitate or impede the intended action, the ease or difficulty of performing a particular action. In the case of organic food consumption, the TPB accounts for the consumer's perceived behavioral control through their knowledge of OFs, the availability and affordability of the products, among other factors. The TPB expands the TRA equation into:

Behavioral Intention (BI) = Attitude (A) + Subjective Norms (SN) + Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)

According to Ajzen (1991, cited in Priyanath and Dangalla (2022) the TPB proposes that intentions are a function of three main components: attitudes toward a behavior, subjective norms, and perceived controls. Donahue (2017) opines that the theory is instrumental to understanding change in the consumers' psychological and actual consumption behaviors. The consumer's buying behavior is interfaced in three distinctive actions: selection, purchase, and consumption. In this case, the first step is acquiring information about the product of interest, which, if it satisfies them, then the consumer will purchase and ultimately consume (Ramya & Ali, 2016). However, Bray (2008) observes that the consumer's actual behavior is a complex function that is difficult to accurately measure; thus, the perceived behavioral control is instead measured by specially designed questionnaires that serve as proxies for measuring influence.

Budhathoki and Pandey (2021) posit that consumers' intentions to purchase organic foods are influenced by their perceptions of health, concerns about environmental sustainability, and perceived quality of the foods. Consequently, the subjective norms, including social media, peer group, and family influence crucially affect their intentions, while the perceived behavioral control factors, such as advertisements, accessibility and pricing, affect their actual purchase (Priyanath & Dangalla, 2022). The TPB, therefore, fits well to summarize consumer behavior and helps in predicting their purchase of organic foods. However, the model, like the TRA model, relies on the technical know-how and the predictive ability of the researcher, given that it assumes the cognitive behavior of the consumer, yet ignores the possibility of subconscious behavior. Its predictive ability is not clear since it does not define how to measure all the factors that influence the consumer's attitude (Manuere et al., 2022).

The theory of goal-directed behavior is an extension of the theory of planned behavior model, where it enjoins the perceived control factor over consumer goals, and the influence of consumer habits in determining their behavior (Bray, 2008). For the case of consumer behavior towards organic products, TGB provides that desired goals, the perceived control of the goals, and habitual practices affect the consumer's decisions on OF consumption. The TGB model differs from the TPB model in the inclusion of the consumer's past behavior (the frequency and recency) and the addition of emotions (positive and negative emotions). It also differs from TPB in structure, where now the behavioral phenomenon goes through desire, on to intention. Bagozzi et al. (2002) assert that according to the model, desires mediate the influence of antecedents on intentions, while intentions influence actions. The model posits that behaviors are not the end, and they emanate from the accomplishment of goals.

Consumer behavior toward Organic Foods in Emerging Markets: Motivations and barriers

Emerging economies are characterized by rapid population growth, high dependence on agriculture, and a growing industrialization resulting in urban growth. The growing urban population drives the food needs upward to feed the urban population (Dholakia & Shukul, 2012). Though reliant on traditional agriculture, the economies have been observed to embrace modernization, even to the extent of some aping the global West. Many such countries have

embraced farm mechanization to expand agriculture, attempting to achieve bulk production to feed their growing urban populations. Moreover, to increase crop yields, some adopted the use of chemicals seeking to meet the growing demand for food within their territories (Basha et al., 2015). The consequences of the modernization of agriculture in the emerging markets have been obvious -ever-increasing prevalence of chronic diseases, genetic challenges including birth defects (Kumar et al., 2023), and increased global warming.

In the process of time, the populace of the emerging markets has come to terms with the adverse effects of their consumption. Some have since sought alternative food to arrest the prevailing struggle with chronic illnesses through a pursuit of healthy lifestyles (Basha et al., 2015). Many continue to gain consciousness and to front their interests over organic labelling, the health value of the food they consume and the environmental impact of their consumption. It has thus drawn the interest of researchers to explore the various factors influencing the choice of foods in various parts of the developing world. The following is a review of the last decade.

While some researchers, like Chetioui et al. (2023), assert that the COVID-19 pandemic was the eye-opener to healthful consumption, that is, the preference for organic food in emerging economies, there exists evidence of the consumption patterns changing even before the COVID-19 era. According to Sharma and Singhvi (2018), consumers worldwide preferred organic over conventional food for being healthy, having superior tastes, being environmentally friendly, and promoting animal safety, among other factors. Sivathanu (2015) observed that women in India chose OFs over conventional food. Moreover, the more educated people, presumably more enlightened, and higher income earners had higher propensities to purchase organic foods. Basha et al. (2015) assert that Indian consumers, in general, had grown a dislike for the inorganic chemicals that characterized the production of conventional foods. Brazil presents another case of the emerging economies, situated in Latin America, where an earlier study by Hoppe et al. (2013) confirmed a liking for OFs. The Brazilian case listed environmental friendliness of the foods, while they also considered naturality and taste. Furthermore, the certification of organic foods drew more trust among Brazilian consumers.

Evidence from Nepal suggests that consumers are most likely to consider behavioral control perception when choosing between organic and conventional foods (Budhathoki & Pandey, 2021). Nepal consumers believed that conventional foods interfered with the functioning of the body's organs, thereby altering normal biological functions and ultimately human behavior. Additionally, consumers in Nepal valued the ideas of their peers and other influential groups of people who had consumed the products. Thus, social norms played a crucial role in shaping intentions to purchase organic products. Jeyakumar Nathan et al. (2021) confirm that peer influence is a significant factor in affecting intentions to purchase. According to Jeyakumar Nathan, young Malaysian consumers evaluate products based on the attitudes of their peer groups. Pham (2020) asserted that consumers in Vietnam followed ethical concerns regarding food choices to develop liberal attitudes toward organic foods, thus creating an incentive for OF consumption. Moreover, the consumers were concerned about their personality and identity, thus altering their behavior and the purpose of the consumption choices they made.

Environmental conservation was another serious concern among consumers. Budhathoki and Pandey (2021) assert that the Nepal consumers envied the products considered to cause environmental degradation, a factor which also ranked highly in the Malaysian market (Jeyakumar Nathan et al., 2021). The Sri Lankan consumers valued so much the preservation of the environment through their predominantly traditional agriculture. The consumers viewed the organic foods to be highly nutritious and of good quality, thus potentially healthy and friendly (Priyanath & Dangalla, 2022). More consumers in the emerging markets, especially in urban regions, are growing in environmental consciousness, which in turn influences their affinity to natural foods to protect their surroundings (Shrestha, 2020). Nguyen et al. (2021) assert that Vietnamese consumers expressed regrets over the consumption of conventional meat products, citing the degradation of the environment. Sharma et al. (2018) opined that prolonged consumption of conventional foods threatened environmental safety, as well as animal welfare. Consequent to these reasons, Sharma et al. (2018) found that consumers developed a preference for eco-friendly and ethically produced food products. However, their previous buying behavior formed part of their affective psychology and attitude toward the organic products. Priyanath and Dangalla (2022) asserted that socio-demographic and economic and other personal factors were also among the critical influencers on the purchase of OFs. Education and income, for example, highly affected the purchase of such products. Education provided knowledge and exposure to information about the products, thus promoting the consumer's intention to purchase. The consumers with higher incomes were also the most likely to purchase the OFs, on the basis that in many cases they commanded higher prices than the conventional foods.

Converse to the promoters of organic foods consumption, other researchers asserted some prohibitive factors to the consumption of the foods. For example, Nguyen et al. (2021) asserted that organic foods fetched premium prices, which barred consumers from purchasing. According to them, a study of Vietnamese evidenced an inverse relationship between pricing and the intention to purchase OFs. Similar results had been earlier extended by Wong and Aini (2017) from their empirical study of organic meat consumption in Malaysia. The factor was prominent in the developing economies, given that many of these countries were characterized by expansive financial constraints among consumers (Nguyen et al., 2017). Consequently, the low-income consumers characterizing these countries expressed a high sensitivity to the pricing of organic foods (Thøgersen et al., 2019). However, Chelang'a et al. (2013) reported a contrary finding, asserting that Kenyan consumers were willing to pay premium prices for local leafy vegetable, while Wang et al. (2019) observed that subjective norms, health concerns, and personal attitude mediated consumers' intentions to purchase OFs in Kenya and Tanzania. Consumers' education and knowledge levels critically modulated their responsiveness to premium pricing on the organic foods (Chelang'a et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2019).

Consumption of Organic Foods in Morocco: Perspectives and Challenges

Morocco presents a case of a thriving market economy. Like other emerging markets, Moroccan consumers have continually developed an interest in organic foods, which was originally phenomenal with the Western economies (Chetioui et al., 2023). Chetioui and associates asserted that the emerging markets' consumers' intentions toward OFs were

influenced primarily by attitude, and additionally by the subjective norms, environmental concern, health consciousness, perceived behavioral control, and organic labelling.

Agence BIO (2024) reports that Morocco is the leading organic food market in Africa, valued at 58.5 million Euros in 2017. The liking for OFs, as reported by the organization, has continued to grow in recent years, however, seeming to be more export-oriented. The consumers there, though increasingly growing preference for OFs, still confuse the products with fresh produce. The mass distribution of organic foods previously offered limited choices for consumers; however, the case has changed with the emergence of organic sections in many stores. Specialized distribution has also expanded with nearly twenty stores, among which four are affiliated with the Green Village Network. Moreover, organic foods have been available in healthy food stores, and in farms in the form of baskets courtesy of AMAPs, and also in weekly markets in large cities, including Casablanca, Marrakech, Rabat, and Mohammedia. Additionally, online stores have also cropped up to expand the reach of organic foods.

Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian consumers shifted their dietary perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic, which aroused consumers' attention to the connection between food and health (Ben Khadda et al., 2022). According to their study, about 99.7 percent of the participants reported that they had recognized that food choices affected health, thus associated it with immunity. The consumers thus developed a preference for organic foods over conventional ones. However, Raif and Aitheda (2021) observed that Moroccan consumers were still divided between whether to go for local organic or imported organic foods. The most consumed local organic foods were dates and olive oil; however, the same composed a portion of the leading imports from other countries (Raif & Aitheda, 2021). However, the consumption of local products is often praised for growing the local economies. Moreover, the Green Morocco Plan, as launched in 2008, seeks to establish and expand spaces for local agriculture in the country.

Raif and Aitheda (2021) asserted that the growth of industrialization had confused consumption behaviors, yet a nostalgia for the traditional way of life had not ceased. Many people sought to reawaken their traditional life through the review of the cultures, thus creating a pathway to the traditional, authentic, and natural foods. The consumers, in this quest, continually seek information on how and where to find pleasure in their consumption.

"The diversity of food supply and taste homogeneity worldwide have impacted consumption mode in Morocco. We can find on the same breakfast table, a local olive oil, cheese from Holland, Moroccan tea, an Italian-manufactured chocolate pounder, a homemade jam, French baguette or croissants, etc. Otherwise, a mixture of natural/ chemical and homemade/ manufactured products. We called that in our research study: The food bipolarity." Raif and Aitheda (2021).

Moroccan advertisements of local products have historically attempted to promote authenticity and encouraged environmental protection through preservation of natural ancestral production technology (Fort & Fort, 2006). Khaoula et al. (2019) confirm that honey consumers preferred it to natural sugar, and to ascertain its naturality, they purchased it directly from the beekeepers. Furthermore, territorial specification is often emphasized alongside the factors applied to differentiate the products from chemically transformed products. For example,

Taounate's and Tiout-Chiadma olive oils are often differentiated from others by specifying their origin (Raif & Aitheda, 2021). The availability of natural products and their labelling attracted the duo's praise, opining that Moroccans need to be rewarded for this. Additionally, Bouhid et al. (2023) emphasize the need to label Moroccan dates, alongside indicating their territorial origins, nutritional values, and quality.

Literature Summary and Research Gap

There exists extensive literature on the growth of organic food consumption globally. However, the greatest concentration of the research has been on developed economies. The growing economies have received minimal coverage, thus creating a dearth of information on how consumers in emerging markets, such as Morocco, perceive organic products. Moreover, many studies employed quantitative approaches to exploring the phenomena in their study contexts, thus leaving out qualitative issues and rich context-specific attributes of the phenomenon. Additionally, the effects of emotional antecedents and the influence of goal-directed behavior have often received little or no attention in studies that have attempted to highlight the situation in developing countries. This study bridges the gap through a grounded qualitative exploration and formulates an empirical model tailored for testing the economic realities of Morocco, and possibly applicable in the context of other emerging economies.

Materials and Methods

Research Approach: Qualitative, exploratory

The current study followed a qualitative design in the exploration. Semi-structured personal interviews were conducted with the participants of the study to explore their motivations and inhibitors to consuming organic food products. The qualitative method was chosen for this baseline study to enable the extraction of data, assessing the qualitative issues of organic food consumption in Morocco. The study guide was designed to help assess the motivations, perceptions and experiences of consumers to better explain the situation of the Moroccan market, which was already poised by other researchers as expanding.

Study Area, Participants and Study Questionnaire

The research was conducted with consumers in the Casablanca region of Morocco. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their shopping habits and whether they had consumed organic foods at least once in the past three-month period. This non-probability sampling method allowed the researchers to deliberately recruit participants based on their shopping behavior and presumed experience with organic foods. 20 participants were interviewed to meet the needs of this study. The composition consisted of men and women in equal proportions, mainly married individuals. The participants were recruited in local commercial areas, such as markets and shopping centers. The interviews were conducted with twenty participants, after which it was determined that data saturation had been achieved, as there was little new information from any additional participants. The data collection method was through semi-structured interviews. The interview questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions that allowed the researchers to explore the participants' perceptions, motivations, and

barriers to consuming organic foods. This format of questions was preferred because it allowed the researchers a flexible approach to probe and capture nuanced individual participants' experiences with organic foods while also maintaining consistency of themes across participants.

The Casablanca region of Morocco depicted a growing uptake of organic food consumption. The region had a large share of organic food outlets, including shops and supermarkets, which indicated a growing consumption trend in the city. Casablanca stands out as the main hub for organic consumption (Lafram et al., 2024). Eddine and Abdelhaq (2023) assert a growing emphasis on food security, quality, environmental protection and water safety in Morocco through the initiatives of the Green Morocco Plan (2008-2020) and the Green Generation (2020-2030). They observed a growth in the green strategy, especially through the growth of sugar production, meat and milk, cereals, and vegetables and fruits production.

Mohtadi et al. (2020) asserted a high adherence to the Mediterranean Diet, or simply the traditional food consumption, among the populace of Casablanca city. Congruent with the green plan emphasis referred to above, the residents of the city highly regarded natural vegetables, pulses, fruits, cereals, fish, and olive oils for health, while also taking small amounts of meat and dairy products. Researchers deduce that this dietary practice reduces the risk of stroke and heart diseases because the foods contain healthy fats and antioxidants (Estruch et al., 2018). Many of the traditional Moroccan cuisines follow the Mediterranean dietary principles – promoting the consumption of legumes, herbs, olive oil, vegetables and seasonal produce. Intrinsically, the Casablanca region's populace, especially the high-income neighborhoods, practice the Mediterranean lifestyle, where they often overlap with organic food preference and health-conscious consumption behavior (Conrad et al., 2018; Mohtadi et al., 2018). Ben Khadda et al. (2022), comparing the regional similarities and differences in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, observed that organic consumption was also affected by the place of residence. The study thus picked Casablanca as the case for the investigation.

Oxford Business Group asserts an upsurge of organic food farming in Morocco due to growth in both local and international demand. They observed that the consumption of organic foods was gaining traction in the local Moroccan market; thus, Morocco launched its first organic food and produce franchise in September 2018. The Green Village was established, which opened three outlets in Casablanca and Rabat, with a fourth one opening in mid-January of 2019. Mohtadi et al. (2020) established that the region accounted for about 65 percent of the volume of the national organic food market. This evidenced a growth, given that earlier studies had estimated the region's organic food market share at 45 percent. According to the researchers, the region had a higher concentration of sales points for organic foods, owing to a growing high-income neighborhood. The Casablanca region is a metropolis with a diversified socio-economic population and a high potential consumer base for organic foods.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process was conducted through personal interviews with participants. A guide questionnaire was pre-designed and pre-tested with five participants to identify potential weaknesses and revised accordingly. Finally, the refined interview guide was developed and used

to conduct semi-structured interviews, which yielded the data necessary for the qualitative analysis to complete this study. The interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings in environments preferred by the participants, including their living rooms, quiet public squares, and other suitable locations. The choice of participants' preferred environments was designed to provide participants with greater comfort and foster trust between them and the researchers, thereby enabling open communication. These physical meeting interviews were conducted with ten participants, with each interview taking an average of one and a quarter hours. The direct interaction method enabled the researchers to observe non-verbal cues and prob responses in real-time. However, it posed logistical challenges, limiting the exercise to a limited geographic area. To bridge the gap, the remaining ten interviews were conducted remotely, utilizing online meetings on Zoom and Microsoft Teams to provide wider geographical coverage and reduce costs and logistical constraints. However, this second method also came with its challenges, including a reduced ability to observe non-verbal cues and issues with internet connectivity. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, during the face-to-face and remote interviews. Interviews explored participants' perspectives and perceptions regarding organic foods. Furthermore, they assessed their experiences and perceived challenges with the products, including availability, accessibility, pricing, consumer awareness, and the existing regulatory frameworks. A total of twenty participants were interviewed to ascertain that the data saturation point had been reached.

The interview recordings were transcribed to make transcripts that would facilitate the analysis process. Thereafter, a rigorous manual coding and data categorization were applied to analyze the data. Following an overview of scientific literature, a treatment grid was developed to serve as an analysis framework for the data. The analysis method facilitated a detailed exploration of the emergent themes, including food consumption habits, perceptions and motivations for consumption, obstacles to adopting OFs, and opportunities for improving consumption. A nuanced understanding of the Moroccan market for organic foods was achieved through this framework analysis, which involved cross-examining consumer discourses and experiences from both horizontal and vertical angles. In all these processes, participant anonymity was highly guarded, with participants accorded random identification numbers instead of their names. Table 1 below summarizes the participant recruitment and interview process.

Table 1

Summary of the interview context

Modality	Description
Parent Population	Buyers in organic stores
Sample Size	N = 20
Method of Finding Respondents	At the exit of organic stores
Interview Guide	Virtual via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, In-person (at home)
Interview Document	Interview guide

Duration of Interviews	One hour and 15 minutes
Pre-test	N = 5, interviews conducted under the same conditions as the final study.

Source: *Author generated*

Results

This section presents the results obtained from analyzing the participant responses about the study's objective. As defined in the introductory chapter, the objective is to explore consumer perceptions of organic foods, identifying the motivations and obstacles to purchase within the context of the theories of consumer behavior: reasoned action, planned behavior, and goal-directed behavior. Ultimately, the study's results should help achieve the final objective of recommending a model for a quantitative study of consumer behavior toward organic foods in Morocco.

Theme 1: Consumer Perceptions of Organic Foods

Participants unanimously displayed a positive perception of organic foods, praising them for being beneficial to health and considering them of high quality too. Similar to consumers in the developed world, Moroccan consumers viewed OFs as a significant benefit to their health. Chetoui et al. (2023) highlighted a growing concern about wellness as a motivation for Moroccans to seek organic food products.

Health has become a fundamental concern for consumers when choosing their food. Many consumers have desires to keep their eating habits in check. Consequently, they often seek to access natural products, which they closely link to organic production. Generally, consumers associate healthy eating with foods that are not chemically produced. A close look revealed that consumers have associated diseases with poor diet and vow to keep themselves informed about the foods they consume. Many have set goals to follow healthy diets, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and carefully monitor their health to increase life expectancy. For this reason, many sought to diversify their diets; however, they maintained that they must avoid chemicals as much as possible.

The health-mindedness of consumers has been highlighted over the decades by researchers from various economies. Basha et al. (2020) observed that health was a paramount consideration in the choice of organic foods among consumers in India. Similarly, South Americans valued health, citing it as a key motivation for choosing OFs (Hoppe et al., 2013). A similar situation is growing in the Moroccan economy. The growth of the food industry, alongside media campaigns against obesity and other metabolic illnesses, has sparked a significant shift away from conventional foods in favor of organic ones.

Theme 2: Access to Information

The study established a limited understanding of the production and manufacturing process for organic foods among the participants. Most participants could only understand the concept of organic foods in the context of having no chemical content. The media was partly to blame for

this information asymmetry, as it created awareness of the need for non-chemical consumption but did not provide sufficient information on the details of organic farming. Therefore, for most consumers, the information they accessed was that OFs were non-chemically boosted. The condition seemed to limit consumers' understanding of organic farms, thus hampering consumer demand. Moreover, there is a need to educate the consumer to differentiate between 'organic' and 'local' products.

Theme 3: Perceived Quality

Researchers have continually examined the influences of perceptions and attitudes on purchasing decisions. The perception of products, especially food, as organic or local appears to foster more trust and encourage a positive attitude toward them. Paull (2023) asserts that Australians were motivated by environmental concerns and social values.

In the current study, the participants initially expressed increased concern about the origin of the products they consumed. They resented the consumption of off-season produced foods, and preferred natural over industrial agriculture products. This confirms Khaoula et al.'s (2019) assertion that consumers prefer to obtain honey directly from beekeepers. The participants associated off-season grown products with being artificial, chemically aided, artificially ripened, and devoid of their natural flavor, but sold at high prices. They asserted that food production should strictly adhere to authenticity.

It was interesting to learn how Moroccan consumers associate production methods with the origin of the foods they consume. However, they highly associated the naturality of products with the products' quality and freshness. Furthermore, the geographical proximity to the production areas added to their reassurance of the products' trustworthiness in terms of health goals. They majorly associated the food industry with products harmful to health and the environment, and they sought out organic alternatives. To the participants, organic foods were promoted as a means of sustainability and animal welfare.

Motivations for Purchase

Health-oriented motivations:

Personal health was almost the exclusive motivation. All participants showed concern for their health, as they sought organic foods. However, only about ten percent of the participants expressed concern for the ecology (sustainable and ethical consumption) in their intentions to purchase OFs. It seems they cared less about the environment when making their purchasing decisions. Intrinsically, the environment often took an afterthought concern, after considering health. It was not perceived as a major motivator to purchase, but rather an additional benefit. Hence, to the respondents, the environment was an issue to consider, however, after considering the effect of their consumption on their health.

"For me, the main reason for buying organic is my health, and taking care of myself. I pay attention to what I eat, and I think organic products are better for my body." Stated one participant. *"I am aware of environmental issues, but honestly, what matters most to me is my health. If I can*

help the environment by buying organic products, that's a bonus, but it's not my main motivation." Added another participant.

The participants repeatedly expressed concerns over food safety, saying, "We no longer know what we eat." *"While the consumption of organic products does not prevent these diseases, it can nevertheless reduce the risks"*. These statements were common across the board. Consumers expressed fears of diseases resulting from food choices, especially cancer. It is palpable the apprehension of lifestyle diseases, exacerbated by the media and television programs.

The Moroccan context of personal health concern was not isolated. Other researchers found similar results in other countries. For example, UK and Chinese consumers were also motivated with personal health goals to purchase organic foods (Wang et al., 2020). It is thus a phenomenon active in both developed and emerging economies.

As Chetioui et al. (2023) asserted, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a significant interest in personal health among many consumers. A participant noted, *"The pandemic has made me think about what I put in my body. I want to boost my immune system and stay healthy, so I'm more mindful of the products I buy."* The post-pandemic period thus highlights the shift in purchasing decisions towards a preference for organic foods, thereby solidifying their choice over conventional foods among health-conscious consumers (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

Vertical and horizontal analysis of qualitative results

Theme	Vertical Dimensions	Horizontal Dimensions
Motivations	- Health: Main driver of purchase. - Environment: Positive impact on nature. - Quality: Products are perceived as better.	- Key Quote: <i>"I buy organic products because I want the best for my children."</i> (Participant 4). - Observation: Motivations are deeply rooted in personal and family values.
Perceptions	- Authenticity: Organic products are perceived as "real." - Values: Alignment with sustainability ideals.	- Key Quote: <i>"Organic products give me the impression of being more natural and authentic."</i> (Participant 6). - Observation: Positive perceptions reinforce the premium image of organic products.
Barriers	- High price: Main obstacle. - Limited accessibility: Complicated logistics. - Lack of information.	- Key Quote: <i>"It is difficult to find organic products at affordable prices."</i> (Participant 8). - Observation: Recurring obstacles hinder broader adoption.
Social Norms	- Peer influence: Social validation. - Moderate societal pressure.	- Key Quote: <i>"In my friend group, consuming organic is the norm."</i> (Participant 10).

		- Observation: Social norms influence certain decisions, but are not universal.
Anticipated Emotions	- Pride: Satisfaction of making a good choice. - Guilt avoidance: Prevented by purchasing organic. - Personal satisfaction.	- Key Quote: <i>"Buying organic means feeling good about my choices."</i> (Participant 3). - Observation: Anticipated emotions reinforce desire and commitment.
Desire	- Intrinsic motivation. - Aesthetics of store shelves: Key factor.	- Key Quote: <i>"Well-organized shelves encourage me to buy organic."</i> (Participant 2). - Observation: Desire is amplified by sensory and emotional triggers.

Source: Author

Social and family motivations

I chose to inquire what determined the first purchase of organic foods by the participants. It turned out that family and friends had a great influence on the participants' purchase decisions. To some, special events, such as the Salon Bio Expo Maroc, which took place in Casablanca from June 21 to 23, 2019, were a determining factor in adopting an organic approach. It turns out that, despite limited advertisements, word of mouth from friends' experiences influenced consumers greatly. One participant narrated, *"My friend invited me to visit the show, and I discovered the world of organic products,"* marking the value of social interactions in the choice of consumables. Some also prefer organic foods because their peers like them. See table 2 above.

In this case, consumption forms a complex construction centered around three poles: the social pole, the health pole, and the pleasure pole, all of which cannot independently influence choices, but rather work together. Moreover, the environment one is in plays a critical role in purchasing OFs, as one participant related given their family's food perceptions. In this case, the participant related that going organic would amount to stigmatization:

"If I go organic, I fear that my relatives will judge me... I can take care of my health in various ways, such as by engaging in sports activities or by incorporating more fruits and vegetables into my diet. I think the impact of consuming organic products is exaggerated... It is often perceived as a kind of fad rather than a real health approach."

This finding raises concerns about social circles potentially hindering the growth of the organic food industry through social stigma. That individuals may intend to change their lifestyles, but the fear of being judged by their social groups deters them from taking the intended actions. The situation can even worsen when organic foods are certified, and there is a lack of well-established organic labeling in Morocco.

The influence of the consumer's social environment is thus a crucial factor in organic consumption. Whether positive or negative, it determines their decision-making. Most assuredly, the family circle heavily determines individuals' preferences and consumption behaviors. We thus

confirm with Nguyen et al. (2021) that social norms, representing the expectations of social circles, exert a significant influence on consumers' purchase intentions and consumption behaviors.

Emotional Motivations

A study by Manuere et al. (2022) confirmed that emotions influence purchasing decisions. According to their findings, Manuere and associates asserted that consumers are more likely to choose organic foods when they experience positive emotions, such as trust in the well-being and safety of the food. The findings of the current study reinforced this assertion (see Table 3 below), especially in the context of uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotion is, somehow, a new concept in consumer behavior, not depicted in the traditional models of consumer behavior. Indeed, as Perugini and Bagozi (2004) assert, traditional models did not distinguish between behavioral desire and behavioral intention. However, through current studies, including this one, we find intention mediated by desire (emotions).

Table 3

Analysis of qualitative results

Themes	Keywords	Verbatims	Observations
Motivations	Health, quality, environment	"I buy organic products because I want the best for my children." (Participant 4)	Health and the environment are key drivers of purchasing behavior.
Perceptions	Authenticity, values, sustainability	"Organic products give me the impression of being more natural and authentic." (Participant 6)	Positive perceptions reinforce the image of organic products.
Barriers	Price, accessibility, and lack of information	"It is difficult to find organic products at affordable prices." (Participant 8)	High cost and limited access are recurring barriers.
Social Norms	Influence, social validation	"In my group of friends, consuming organic is the norm." (Participant 10)	Social norms influence decisions, but with varying intensity.
Anticipated Emotions	Pride, guilt, satisfaction	"Buying organic means feeling good about my choices." (Participant 3)	Positive emotions reinforce desire and purchase intention.
Desire	Desire, motivation, attractiveness	"Well-organized shelves encourage me to buy organic." (Participant 2)	Desire acts as an emotional catalyst, reinforced by sensory experience.

Source: Author

Barriers to Purchase

In many studies on the topic of organic food consumption, pricing often appears as a significant hindrance to adoption. The products have been observed to fetch higher prices than

conventional foods, thereby capping demand for OFs. Similarly, this study revealed a strong desire and intention to purchase OFs; however, the participants unanimously criticized the high pricing of organic foods, making it difficult for them to sustain consumption, especially with large families. A participant narrated: *"Organic products are really expensive compared to conventional alternatives."* *"We are a family of three, so it's still okay, but if we were a large family, we would need a considerable budget to feed ourselves with organic products."* Table 4 below gives more illustrations.

Table 4

Variables specific to the Moroccan context

Theme	Main Findings	Justification by Verbatim	Theoretical Support (APA)
Health	Health is perceived as the key factor motivating the purchase of organic products.	- <i>"I prefer buying organic to avoid chemical products; it's better for my health and my family's."</i> (Participant 3). - <i>"Organic is a guarantee against diseases linked to pesticides."</i> (Participant 7).	Hughner et al. (2007) confirm that consumers associate organic products with health benefits.
Price as a Barrier	The high price of organic products is identified as a major barrier in the Moroccan context.	- <i>"Organic products are too expensive for my budget."</i> (Participant 8). - <i>"Even if I want to buy organic, I cannot afford it regularly."</i> (Participant 11).	Hemmerling et al. (2015) highlight that price remains a universal obstacle, amplified in emerging countries like Morocco.
Information Transparency	The lack of clarity on labels and the origin of organic products limits Moroccan consumers' trust.	- <i>"I don't always know if a product is truly organic because clear certifications are missing."</i> (Participant 5). - <i>"The information on labels is not detailed enough to be reassuring."</i> (Participant 10).	Thøgersen et al. (2016) emphasize that information transparency is essential to building consumer trust.

Source: Author

A second barrier was the limited access. The participants reported that the products were in short supply, making them difficult to obtain. Moreover, different kinds of products would not be easily accessed in one particular place. It often took consumers to walk to different places to meet the needs of their shopping list. Many of this study's participants preferred that varieties of OFs be stocked together to make shopping more convenient, rather than having to visit different places to acquire products of interest. *"It is not always convenient to have to go to a specific store to buy organic products... Sometimes, I prefer to shop in a supermarket and go straight home; it is more convenient and saves me time."* Narrated by one participant.

Another emergent barrier from the study was information scarcity. Participants noted that there was limited information available about organic food products, which made decision-making challenging, as seen in the quotes from participants 5 and 10 in Table 4 above. The scarcity of information made it difficult for them to make the right choices. According to the participants, it was not enough to simply have a label on the products; they should also provide the necessary information about the specific products for consumer evaluation.

Summary of Findings

Morocco, particularly Casablanca, exhibited similar results to those of other developing economies. The purchase barriers were similar across the research field. However, the motivations may vary in degree. For example, the Moroccan consumer highly regarded personal health, while ecological concerns were less regarded. From a total of 50 testimonies given by the 20 participants about their motivations for consuming OFs, 40 mentioned health as a highly regarded motivation. In contrast, better taste was mentioned in about eight confessions, and environmental safety was mentioned only twice. The results depicted a high regard for self-benefit over the communal – that is, personal health was of greater concern to consumers than the common good or the environment. However, like in other regions, Morocco was experiencing steady growth in the uptake of organic foods. If price, information, and accessibility issues were addressed, then a very promising organic food sector would emerge.

Discussion

The consumption of organic foods is steadily gaining momentum in Morocco's economy. Although it does not exclusively meet basic physiological needs, the habit is gaining familiarity and popularity over time. The study revealed that consumers highly regarded OFs and had positive intentions regarding their consumption. Many expressed a wish to frequently, if not always, consume OFs, emphasizing their attraction to OFs for personal health reasons, among others.

However, the inclination to consume the products often meets obstacles in the process, given that the goods are often limited in supply or, when available, are scattered, making it difficult for a consumer to collect all they need without strife. Even for the available products, there is limited information to educate consumers on their dietary contents and consumption benefits, thus not fully guiding decision-making. Consumers also face hindrances to their consumption desires due to the high prices the products command, while their income is limited and allocated to meet a range of needs.

The study also revealed that, despite consumers having positive attitudes toward OFs, they would not make extra efforts to find them if they were not available in conventional stores. Consumers would rather seek alternative means, such as reducing their consumption of fatty foods and increasing physical activity, to maintain their health. By this, the consumers expressed that OF consumption was just one among many methods to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This observation implies that positive attitude and the desire to purchase do not necessarily translate into actual behavior. Thus, we establish a distinction between attitude, desire, and behavioral

intention. However, perceived behavioral control of products also made a significant highlight among Moroccans. Many perceived that conventional foods would affect health and behavior. The observed results confirmed the studies of Jeyakumar Nathan et al. (2021) and Budhathoki and Pandey (2021), which suggested that consumers in emerging markets perceive that sustained consumption of conventional foods may interfere with human behavior.

Moroccan Specificities: Stronger role of social norms than in Europe

This exploration in Casablanca, Morocco, highlights several key concepts related to the consumption of organic food. The first aspect is understanding the differences in purchase motivations between developed and emerging markets. While consumers in mature markets emphasize ethics, animal health, and their support for local economies, developing markets have different priorities. Health, however, is a universal motivation, whereas environmental concern varies across geographical locations.

Pricing, availability, information and social norms form another set of consumption determinants. More so for developing economies like Morocco, prices are a serious determinant, especially in view of relatively low incomes (Thøgersen et al., 2019) and expanded family sizes and budget constraints (Nguyen et al., 2017). Many families prefer to allocate their incomes to foods with favorable prices, allowing them to feed their entire families. Moreover, family norms have a significant influence on the emotions and attitudes toward consumption, which in turn affect the actual behavior toward organic foods in Morocco. This confirms the assertions of Bray (2008) and Manuere et al. (2022) that social norms, like in the theory of reasoned action (TRA), highly influence consumer attitudes toward their intended actions. Furthermore, the communal attitude influences the consumer's emotions, which in turn affect the desire and intention to purchase, where the consumer now has to balance their consumption goals with family or communal expectations. This confirms the stipulations of goal-directed behavior, as explained by Bagozi (2002), which states that despite consumers' planned behavior, social responsibility regulates their emotions, thereby mediating between their personal goals and actual actions.

Empirical Model

The current study evaluated consumer perception of organic foods in the Moroccan market from a theoretical perspective, employing a qualitative research design. The results indicate that consumers' concerns about personal health, perceived quality of OFs, social norms, availability and access to OFs, pricing, information, and environmental concerns are the main determinants of their intention to purchase. However, the factors could not explain the degree of relationship with the purchase and consumption of the products. We therefore recommend conducting a quantitative analysis of the factors through an empirical study to model the relationship specifically for Morocco. For this reason, the researcher hereby defines an empirical model based on the qualitative analysis for quantitative evaluation as follows.

We first begin by defining the research hypotheses for the model using the goal-directed behavior and the results of the qualitative study as follows:

Hypothesis from the theoretical model:

Hypotheses on Desire and intention to purchase:

According to the goal-directed behavior model, desire and intention to purchase play central roles in understanding consumer behavior. The desire variable represents the initial, emotional attraction to the commodity, organic foods, while purchase intention reflects the more rational and action-oriented decision-making. The two variables closely interact, translating the consumer preferences into concrete actions. The hypotheses follow that:

H1: The desire to purchase positively influences the intention to purchase organic products.

H2: Purchase desire mediates the relationship between attitude toward purchasing organic products and intention to purchase these products.

H3: Purchase desire mediates the relationship between social norms and intention to purchase these products.

H4a: Purchase desire mediates the relationship between anticipated positive emotions and purchase intention.

H4b: Purchase desire mediates the relationship between anticipated negative emotions and purchase intention.

Hypotheses on Access and Control:

The perceived control over acquisition and accessibility to organic foods significantly influence decisions about their purchase. Moreover, while access barriers may inhibit purchase, the consumers' feelings of mastery and control may influence the likelihood of a favorable behavior.

H5a: Difficulty of access to organic products negatively influences the intention to purchase these products.

H5b: Perceived control over the purchase of organic products positively influences the intention to purchase these products.

H6a: Difficulty of access to organic products negatively influences the desire to purchase.

H6b: Perceived control over the purchase of organic products positively influences the desire to purchase.

Hypotheses on the Influence of Purchase Frequency on Purchase Desire and Purchase Intention:

Consumers' past behavior, particularly the frequency of their purchases, plays a significant role in determining their continued commitment to a particular product. Furthermore, high frequency of purchase may not only impact the desire and intentions to purchase, but also depict the prevailing ecological cycle of the consumer's daily life.

H7a: The Frequency of purchasing organic products positively influences the desire to purchase.

H7b: The Frequency of purchasing organic products positively influences purchase intention.

Hypotheses on Attitude and Social Norms:

Personal attitude toward organic foods and the social norms that one subscribes to have been observed to exert significant influence on the desire and intention to purchase the products. Attitude reflects one's personal feelings, while social norms embody the collective social and environmental pressure and expectations. The combined effect of these factors directs the consumer's consumption decisions.

H8: Attitudes toward purchasing organic products positively influence purchase intention for these products.

H9: Social norms positively influence the intention to purchase organic products.

Additional Hypothesis from the Qualitative Study

The qualitative study results presented in the chapter above reveal additional variables that help deepen the scope of the GDB theory model, informing the empirical study recommended herein. The variables are the consumer perceptual factors as related to organic food consumption in Morocco. They include consumer health concerns, organic food prices, and transparency in information.

Consumer health consciousness:

Health consciousness refers to the degree to which consumers value their personal and family health and how they rate foods about this factor. According to a qualitative study, consumers in Morocco perceive organic foods as promoters of personal health; therefore, they highly recommend their consumption.

H10: Consumer health awareness positively influences attitude, desire and purchase intention for organic food products.

Price and Information Transparency:

Product pricing and knowledgeability about organic foods significantly influence consumers' perceptions, desires and intention to purchase the products. While pricing may appear to hinder purchase, given the premium pricing for organic foods, precise and reliable information, such as product origin and certification, can build consumer confidence and encourage the intention to buy.

H11: The price of organic food products has a negative influence on consumers' desire to purchase these products.

H12: The price of organic food products negatively influences consumers' intention to purchase these products.

H13: The transparency of information (origin, certification) on organic products positively influences consumers' attitudes towards these products.

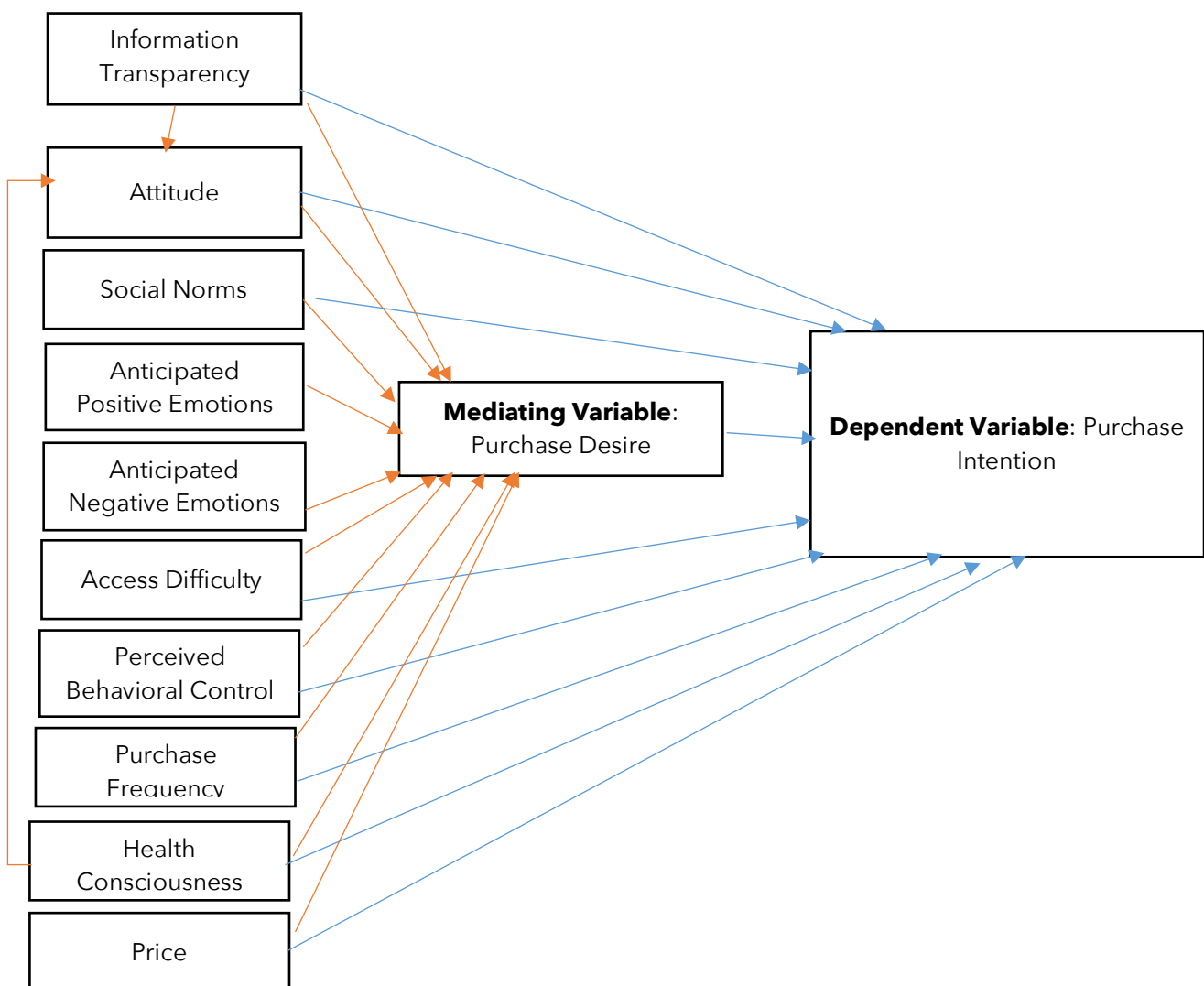
H14: Transparency of information on organic products positively influences consumers' desire to purchase these products.

H15: The transparency of information on organic products positively influences consumers' purchase intentions for these products.

The totality of the hypotheses above thus gives the empirical model below:

Figure1

Empirical model for quantitative evaluation of consumer behavior toward organic foods in Morocco



Source: Author's development

Implications: Need for awareness campaigns and improved accessibility

The findings of this study demonstrated that organic foods were gaining popularity in Morocco, and many continue to desire them. However, it also deduced that the OFs were still limited in supply, and where available, were scattered such that consumers would require extra time and resources to gather all foodstuffs to meet their needs. This was detrimental to consumer attitudes and desires; thus, many expressed that they would rather seek other means to stay healthy and fit, rather than having to struggle to find OFs from scattered locations. Additionally, consumers lamented a lack of information and certification for organic foods, leaving them with insufficient knowledge for evaluation and decision-making. Moreover, the media and advertisers did not give valuable information about the products. The continuity of these trends results in a massive setback to the growth of the organic food market and industry. The stakeholders in the sector, therefore, need to step up and fill the gap by creating consumer awareness campaigns that provide sufficient information about organic foods. Furthermore, they need to make the products available near consumers and ensure they have authentic certifications with enough information about their nutritional composition, origins, and consumption benefits. Stakeholders need to implement measures that can enhance consumer confidence in the products, thereby encouraging them to make purchases.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to qualitatively evaluate consumer perceptions of organic foods in Morocco and to develop an empirical model for a possible future quantitative exploration of the same. The qualitative findings confirmed the theory of goal-directed behavior and the existing literature, which suggests that consumers attend to products based on their personal consumption goals, attitudes toward the products, perceived behavioral control, and prevailing subjective norms. The Moroccan consumer was found to be seeking a healthy lifestyle, avoiding lifestyle diseases, and thus pushing them to seek natural foods that contain no chemicals. They believed that conventional foods had artificial alterations that boosted their maturity, thus being prone to interfere with human health and behavior. For this reason, consumers had formed negative attitudes toward conventional foods and preferred organic ones, hoping to meet their health goals by consuming the latter. However, family norms caught up with several consumers, thus influencing their purchasing decisions. Additionally, Moroccan consumers' purchasing intentions were influenced by the price factor of organic foods, their availability, and information about the products. Their decisions were based on whether they could access the products of their choice, the information provided about the products, including their production, origins, and certifications, as well as the pricing. These factors were thus used to assemble an empirical model recommending a further quantitative exploration of the situation to quantify the factors.

Limitations: Limited to Casablanca, small sample size

This had a few limitations to its undertaking. First, the study was qualitative and conducted with a small number of participants, allowing for convenience. Moreover, the Casablanca region was chosen to represent the Moroccan economy. To this effect, the results may be limited to the region and a few individuals, whose opinions and experiences may or may not accurately

represent the entire population. Secondly, by qualitatively exploring the problem, only opinions and experiences were analyzed. The results are thus limited to a summary of views, rather than quantifying to get the magnitude of the variables realized.

Suggestions for Future Research

Due to the limitations above, we recommend conducting a quantitative study on the problem to validate the observed factors. Future explorations should build on the model proposed herein through large-scale analyses with expanded coverage to other Moroccan cities, thereby helping to validate the relationships stipulated in the empirical model presented here. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could be a suitable approach for measuring the strength of the observed constructs, as well as the hypotheses derived from the qualitative findings. This could be well achieved through a structured survey. Besides, longitudinal research designs could potentially offer a deeper understanding of how consumers' attitudes and behavior toward organic foods evolve over time, particularly with improved awareness campaigns and increased product availability.

The study also recommends a mixed-methods approach to improve the triangulation of the qualitative findings with validation through quantitative procedures. Through this means, the causal links between attitude, desire, and purchase intention can be identified, considering the presence of mediating variables like emotions and the perceived behavioral control. Furthermore, researchers should consider investigating the role played by organic labeling and certification systems in improving consumer trust in organic foods, especially in markets with distorted regulatory frameworks.

Additionally, future studies should consider consumer segmentation, for example, by rural and urban dwelling, and or by income levels. The segmentation should help highlight context-specific behaviors to information policy formulation. Moreover, comparative regional studies, for example, between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Sub-Saharan could inform more on the regional dynamics on organic food uptake. This could inform national food policy formulation and international marketing strategies.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no potential conflicts of interest to my attention. The work was fully developed by the author, having no funding or external collaborations that could warrant any person's interest.

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Annex

Annex 1: Interview Guide

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for participating in this study, which aims to understand better the determinants and antecedents of the consumption of organic agricultural products in Morocco. Your responses will be treated confidentially.

Before we begin, allow me to explain how our discussion will proceed briefly.

Participant Introduction

We will start with a few questions to better understand your perceptions and purchasing habits regarding organic agricultural products.

Questions

1. When you think of organic agricultural products:
 - What are the first thoughts that come to your mind?
 - What adjectives, situations, or people do you associate with these products?
 - Are there any other aspects that come to mind?
2. If you had to talk about organic agricultural products to someone, what would you say?
3. Tell us about your purchasing habits regarding organic agricultural products:
 - Do you regularly buy organic products?
 - If yes, what types of products do you purchase most often?
 - If not, why?
4. Among the following criteria, what motivates you the most when purchasing an organic agricultural product?
 - Product quality
 - Price
 - Health
 - Nutritional value
 - Organic certification
 - Brand reputation
 - Geographic origin
 - Environmental impact
 - Other (please specify)
5. How would you assess your knowledge of organic agricultural products?
6. What factors influence your decision to buy or not buy organic products?

7. What obstacles do you face when purchasing organic agricultural products?
8. How do you perceive the availability of organic products in the Moroccan market?
9. In your opinion, what are the main reasons that encourage Moroccan consumers to buy organic agricultural products?
10. Would you be willing to pay a higher price for organic agricultural products?
11. Have you ever participated in awareness or educational programs on the benefits of organic products?
12. How would you describe your level of trust in the labels and certifications of organic products in Morocco?
13. What information channels do you use to learn about organic agricultural products?
14. Do you have any suggestions for improving the promotion and consumption of organic products in Morocco?
15. Do you have any other comments or information you would like to share?