





## DETERMINANTS OF ORGANIC FOOD CONSUMPTION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN MALAYSIA: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER


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### Abstract:

Organic food consumption among young adults has attracted increasing scholarly and practical attention due to growing concerns over health, food safety, and environmental sustainability. However, existing empirical findings remain fragmented, with limited integration of psychological, social, and control-related determinants, particularly within emerging economies such as Malaysia. This limitation restricts a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping organic food consumption behaviour among young consumers. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), this conceptual paper proposes an extended framework that integrates attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control with additional constructs, namely health consciousness and environmental concern. By incorporating these contemporary sustainability-driven factors, the study advances TPB beyond its traditional scope to better reflect evolving consumer priorities. The proposed framework offers a more holistic explanation of organic food consumption by capturing the interplay between individual evaluations, social influences, and perceived constraints within the Malaysian context. This study contributes theoretically by extending TPB in an emerging economy setting and practically by providing insights for policymakers and marketers to design targeted interventions that promote sustainable and health-oriented consumption among young adults.

DOI:10.35631/AJBES.827020 **Keywords:**

Attitude, Environmental Concern, Organic Food Consumption,  
Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Young Adults



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## Introduction

The demand for organic food has increased steadily over the past two decades as consumers place greater emphasis on health, food safety, and environmentally responsible agricultural practices. Organic food is generally defined by the absence of synthetic inputs, which contributes to lower environmental impact and supports sustainable farming systems (Yasin et al., 2023). This interaction reflects the combined influence of personal health motivation and environmental values in shaping consumption behaviour. More broadly, organic food is designed to reduce environmental impact by conserving natural resources (Azli et al., 2025). In recent years, food products featuring health-related claims, particularly those with organic labels, have gained prominence as consumers increasingly associate these products with added value and healthier, more natural dietary choices (Yasin et al., 2023). As concerns over the long-term effects of conventional food production grow, organic food has attracted consumers who associate it with healthier diets and environmentally responsible lifestyles (Khan et al., 2023). Consequently, organic products are often preferred due to production processes that exclude the use of chemical pesticides, antibiotics, growth hormones, irradiation, and genetically modified organisms.

Globally, organic food has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the food market, particularly in regions such as the United States, Europe, Australia, and Japan (Bee Lian et al., 2016). Data from *The World of Organic Agriculture* (2021) indicate that global sales of organic food and beverages reached USD 112 billion in 2019, representing a more than 50 percent increase since 2013. Similar developments can be observed in Asia, including Malaysia, where economic growth, urbanisation, and greater exposure to global food trends have reshaped consumer food preferences. Young adults, particularly those in urban and educated segments, represent a critical demographic in this transition toward sustainable food consumption, given their higher exposure to sustainability discourse and evolving lifestyle preferences (Tuan Shahidil Akma et al., 2025).

Despite rising interest, the organic food sector in Malaysia continues to face several challenges. Research by Tiraeyari et al. (2013) highlights difficulties faced by farmers in adopting organic farming practices, including high certification costs, limited technical expertise, labour shortages, and challenges related to marketing and distribution. As a result, a large proportion of organic food products available in Malaysia are imported. According to the Organic Trade Association (2015), organic products sold in Malaysia are primarily sourced from countries

such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, and several European nations. While imports increase product variety, they also contribute to higher prices and limited affordability.

Price remains a significant barrier to the consumption of organic food in Malaysia. Previous studies have reported that organic food prices are substantially higher than those of conventional alternatives, with price premiums ranging from 100% to 300% (Bee Lian et al., 2016). Such price differences restrict regular consumption and help explain why organic food purchases remain inconsistent. This issue is particularly relevant among young adults. Although young consumers are often described as more health-conscious and environmentally aware, particularly those residing in urban areas and possessing higher educational attainment, their actual consumption of organic food remains relatively low. This suggests a gap between positive intentions and actual purchasing behaviour.

Understanding this gap is important because young adults represent a key consumer group with the potential to shape future demand for sustainable food products. To address this issue, the present study examines the determinants of organic food consumption among young adults in Malaysia using an extended Theory of Planned Behaviour framework (Ajzen, 1991). By focusing on psychological, social, and control-related factors, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of organic food consumption behaviour in a developing country context. The findings are expected to offer both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour to the consumption of organic food in Malaysia. From a practical perspective, the results may assist producers, retailers, and policymakers in designing more effective marketing strategies and policy measures, such as awareness initiatives or support programmes, to encourage organic food consumption among young adults.

## Literature Review

### *Definition of Organic Food Consumption*

The Malaysian organic food industry, while modest in scale, is experiencing a significant surge in interest and demand, especially among young adults. This demographic is increasingly driven by a desire for healthier lifestyle choices, which bodes well for the future growth of organic offerings in the market. Although the absence of synthetic inputs generally defines organic food, the concept remains contested due to variations in certification standards and consumer perceptions (Seufert et al., 2017). The organic food industry has experienced significant growth in recent years.

According to the Malaysian Department of Agriculture (DOA), there were 27 organic producers with a total area of 131 hectares in Malaysia in 2001. Furthermore, the organic products are limited to vegetables and fruit. In 2013, the Malaysian Department of Agriculture (DOA) reported that a total of 89 farms occupied 1,634 hectares of land under organic farming, with 49 farmers holding a valid certificate (Somasundram et al., 2016). Recently, there has been significant attention on food products with health-related claims, especially those labelled as organic. These products are perceived as providing added value and meeting the increasing consumer demand for healthier, more natural dietary options (Yasin et al., 2023). Further research is needed to fully understand the factors that influence the intention to consume organic food among Malaysian young adults.

## ***Theory of Planned Behaviour Model (TPB)***

A substantial body of literature identifies the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as one of the most robust and widely applied theoretical frameworks for predicting organic food consumption intentions among young adults (Maichum et al., 2016). TPB has been extensively validated across diverse contexts, demonstrating strong explanatory power in capturing consumers' decision-making processes and their willingness to engage in organic food consumption (Ahmed et al., 2021; Kashif et al., 2020). However, the traditional TPB framework may not fully capture the evolving nature of sustainability-driven consumption. Therefore, this study extends TPB by incorporating health consciousness and environmental concern, reflecting contemporary consumer priorities and enhancing the model's relevance in explaining organic food consumption behaviour among young adults.

## ***Hypothesis Development***

Drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), this study develops a set of hypotheses to explain the consumption of organic food among young adults in Malaysia. TPB posits that behaviour is shaped by a combination of attitudinal, social, and control-related factors, which jointly influence individuals' decision-making processes (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of organic food consumption, these factors are particularly relevant, as purchasing decisions often involve trade-offs between health considerations, environmental values, social influence, and perceived constraints. Building on prior empirical findings and addressing gaps in non-Western contexts, the following subsections discuss the theoretical rationale underlying each construct and its proposed relationship with organic food consumption. Despite consistent findings, some studies report insignificant relationships, indicating the need for further empirical validation in emerging economies.

### ***Attitudes***

Attitude plays a central role in explaining the link between behavioral intention and actual behavior in psychological and consumer behavior research. It reflects an individual's overall evaluation of a product or behaviour, such as whether it is perceived positively or negatively (Ahmed et al., 2021). When individuals hold favourable attitudes, they are more likely to develop intentions and act in line with those evaluations (Wang et al., 2019). Prior studies indicate that young adults generally perceive organic food positively due to its perceived health and environmental benefits (Trivedi et al., 2018). Consistent with this view, more favourable attitudes toward organic food are expected to increase the likelihood of its consumption (Irianto, 2015). However, empirical evidence from non-Western contexts, particularly Malaysia, remains limited, suggesting the need for further investigation. Based on this assumption, a hypothesis was proposed:

H<sub>1</sub>: Attitude has a positive relationship with organic food consumption

### ***Health Consciousness***

Health consciousness refers to the extent to which individuals incorporate health considerations into their daily decision-making. Health-conscious consumers tend to be more attentive to food quality, nutritional value, and long-term health outcomes, which may motivate organic food consumption (Arslan, 2025). Previous research shows that higher health consciousness is

associated with more favourable evaluations of organic food, as such products are commonly perceived as healthier than conventional alternatives (Hu et al., 2024; Raza et al., 2019). As a result, individuals who place greater emphasis on maintaining a healthy lifestyle are more likely to include organic food in their diets. Based on this assumption, a hypothesis was proposed:

H<sub>2</sub>: Health Consciousness has a positive relationship with organic food consumption

### ***Environmental Concern***

Environmental concern reflects individuals' awareness of environmental problems and their perceived responsibility to address these issues through sustainable consumption (Barrera-Verdugo & Durán-Sandoval, 2024). Consumers with stronger environmental concern are more likely to support products that are perceived as environmentally friendly, including organic food. Given that organic farming practices are commonly associated with reduced environmental impact, environmentally concerned individuals may view organic food consumption as a way to align personal behaviour with environmental values. This suggests that higher levels of environmental concern are likely to lead to increased organic food consumption among young adults. Based on this assumption, a hypothesis was proposed:

H<sub>3</sub>: Environmental Concern has a positive relationship with organic food consumption

### ***Subjective Norms***

Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure from important others, such as family members, peers, or reference groups, to engage in a particular behaviour (Ahmed et al., 2021). Within the Theory of Planned Behaviour, subjective norms capture the social influence that shapes individual decision-making (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In the context of organic food consumption, social encouragement or approval from significant others may increase individuals' willingness to consume organic food. Although prior findings on the role of subjective norms are mixed (Scalco et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2017), social influence may be particularly relevant for young adults, who are generally more responsive to peer opinions and social expectations. As a result, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H<sub>4</sub>: Subjective Norms have a positive relationship with organic food consumption.

### ***Perceived Behavioural Control***

Perceived behavioural control refers to individuals' perceptions of their ability to perform a behavior, considering available resources and perceived barriers (Ajzen, 1991). It reflects confidence in one's capacity to carry out a behaviour, such as access, affordability, and personal capability (Abdullah et al., 2022). When consumers perceive greater control over purchasing organic food, they are more likely to translate intention into actual consumption. Previous studies have demonstrated a positive association between perceived behavioural control and purchase intentions in various sustainability-related contexts, including organic food and green products (Tarkiainen & Sundqvist, 2005; Chen & Tung, 2014; Moser, 2015). Thus, higher perceived behavioural control is expected to facilitate the consumption of organic food. As a result of this discussion, the hypotheses were proposed:

H<sub>5</sub>: Perceived behavioural control has a positive relationship with organic food consumption.

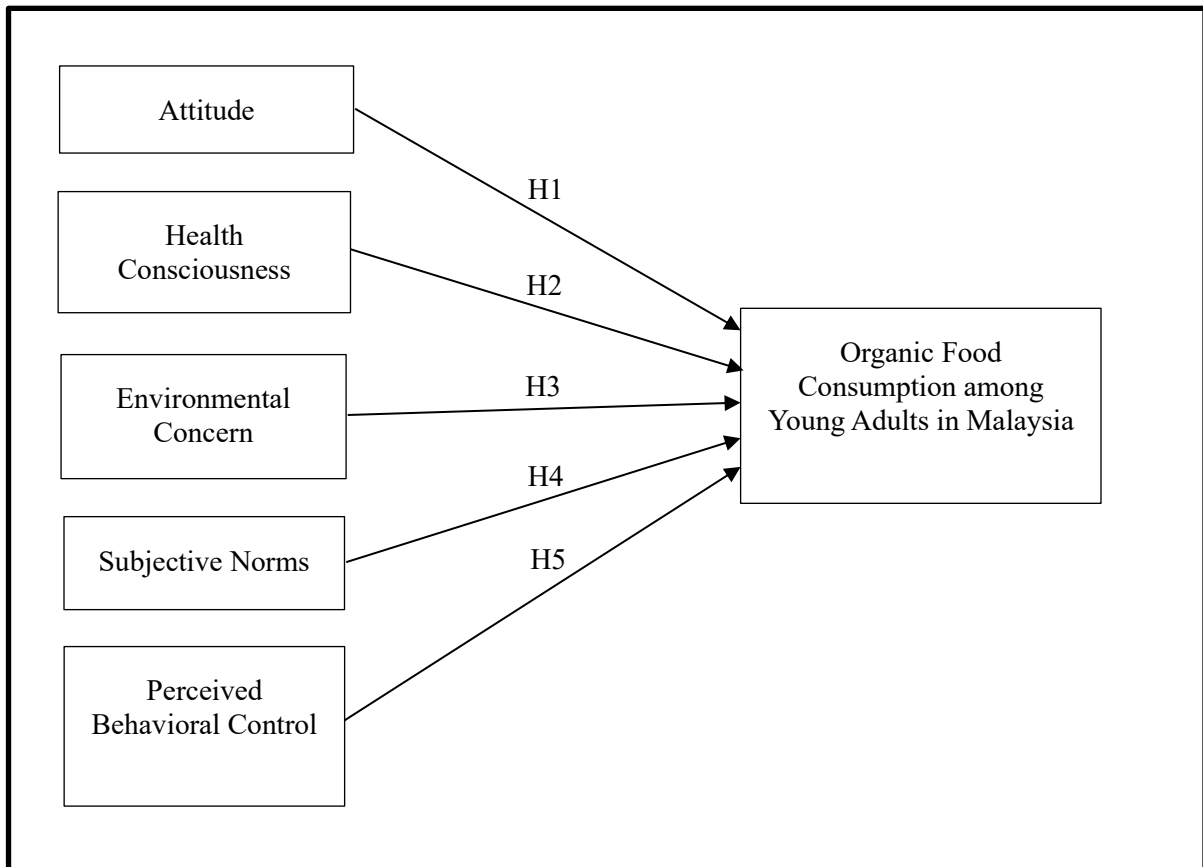
### **Conceptual Framework**

The concept above explains the consumption of organic food among young adults in Malaysia. The framework is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior proposed by Ajzen (1991), which suggests that behaviour is influenced by attitudinal, social, and control-related factors. Consistent with this theoretical foundation, the model incorporates attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as key determinants of organic food consumption.

However, to better capture the motivations underlying organic food consumption, this study extends the traditional TPB by integrating two additional constructs, which are health consciousness and environmental concern. These variables reflect growing consumer awareness regarding personal health and environmental sustainability, which are frequently associated with organic food consumption but are not explicitly included in the original TPB framework.

Attitude reflects young adults' overall evaluation of organic food consumption, including their beliefs about its benefits and desirability. Health consciousness represents the extent to which individuals prioritise health considerations in their daily food choices, while environmental concern captures awareness of environmental issues and a sense of responsibility toward sustainable consumption. Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure from significant others, such as family members and peers, to consume organic food. Perceived behavioural control reflects individuals' perceptions of their ability to consume organic food, taking into account factors such as affordability, availability, and personal resources.

By integrating TPB constructs with health- and environment-related factors, the framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of organic food consumption behaviour. This integrated model is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where increasing awareness of healthy lifestyles and environmental sustainability may influence young adults' food choices. Therefore, the framework extends TPB by incorporating additional determinants that reflect contemporary consumer concerns and by offering a context-specific perspective on organic food consumption in a developing country. The framework also suggests potential interaction effects between health consciousness and environmental concern.



**Conceptual Framework**

**Conclusion**

This study concludes that the conceptual paper highlights the importance of understanding the factors that influence organic food consumption among young adults in Malaysia. By drawing on the Theory of Planned Behaviour developed by Ajzen (1991) and incorporating additional determinants such as health consciousness and environmental concern, the study proposes an integrated perspective to explain organic food consumption behaviour. The paper contributes to the literature by addressing the limited focus on emerging economies and by providing a clearer understanding of the psychological, social, and environmental factors shaping young consumers' food choices. The insights offered may guide future empirical research and support policymakers and practitioners in promoting healthier and more sustainable consumption practices.

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends the Theory of Planned Behaviour by incorporating health consciousness and environmental concern, reflecting contemporary sustainability-driven consumption patterns. Second, it provides empirical direction for understanding organic food consumption in emerging economies, particularly Malaysia. Third, it integrates psychological, social, and control-related factors into a unified framework.

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