

Organic Food Consumption Among College Students: Implications for Sustainability and Consumer Education

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Abstract: *The present study analyses the intention to consume organic foods among Peruvian university students, considering dimensions such as attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control, moral norm, and self-identity. Utilising a quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional approach, a structured questionnaire was administered to 402 participants, employing scales that had been validated in previous research. The results indicate that students have a favourable attitude towards consuming organic foods, which is supported by positive intentions and the perception of health and environmental benefits. The influence of social and moral factors was also identified, highlighting the importance of self-identification as a sustainable consumer. Nevertheless, obstacles pertaining to cost and accessibility persist, thereby constraining actual consumption. The study concludes that universities play a fundamental role in promoting responsible consumption through environmental education programmes and institutional strategies, thus fostering the development of young people as agents of change committed to the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence that can inform the design of policies and practices aimed at promoting healthier, more equitable, and environmentally responsible lifestyles.*

Keywords: *Responsible Consumption, Organic Foods, College Students, Sustainability, Purchase Intent, Consumer Education, Sustainable Identity*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, organic food consumption has evolved from a niche market to a pivotal component in the transition towards sustainable production and consumption systems. These products, cultivated without the utilisation of synthetic agrochemicals and with practices that prioritise environmental respect, have been promoted as alternatives that promote both individual health and ecosystem preservation. In this sense, the expansion of the organic food market is indicative of a more extensive transformation in social expectations towards lifestyles that integrate principles of sustainability, ethics, and collective well-being [1, 2].

Despite the continuous growth in global demand for organic foods, its consolidation is contingent not only on the availability of supply, but also on consumer education and awareness. Recent studies have demonstrated that a paucity of knowledge concerning the environmental and nutritional benefits, in addition to distrust of certification systems, constitute significant obstacles to their adoption, especially in emerging countries [3], [4]. Conversely, when consumers are provided with clear, coherent, and accessible information, there is a concomitant increase in the likelihood of integrating these types of products into their daily practices, thereby transforming the purchasing decision into a conscious act aligned with the values of social responsibility [5].

Within this context, university students constitute a strategic analysis group. At this particular stage of academic and personal development, consumption decisions are influenced by a combination of immediate preferences and complex processes of identity and social construction. The university, in addition to its function as an institution for professional training, fulfils an indispensable role in the dissemination of values associated with sustainability and responsible consumption. Research conducted in various countries has demonstrated that young university students exhibit a high level of receptiveness to environmental education messages. Furthermore, the academic and social experiences confronting these students during their university years have been shown to exert a decisive influence on the adoption of habits that persist into their adult lives [6], [7].

Consequently, the consumption of organic foods cannot be understood solely as an individual decision motivated by the search for health benefits, but also as part of the construction of sustainable lifestyles. This consumption model integrates ethical, environmental and social components, enabling individuals to express their commitment to collective well-being and the protection of the natural environment. The extant literature has indicated that, in many cases, responsible consumption becomes a means of self-expression and a practice that reinforces personal identity as a conscious and committed citizen [8]. In this sense, organic foods represent a market product as well as a cultural and social symbol. This symbolism contributes to redefining the relationships between consumption, identity, and sustainability.

In Latin America, and particularly in countries such as Peru, where this research was conducted, the organic food market is expanding but faces challenges related to affordability, availability in distribution channels, and trust in product certification. In light of these conditions, consumer education and awareness assume even greater significance as the primary mechanisms for mitigating uncertainty and fostering consumption practices that are aligned with sustainability principles. As Leyva-Hernández et al. have previously indicated, the intention to purchase organic foods is contingent on the values that guide consumers' decisions. It is in educational settings that these values can be reinforced and projected into the future.

In this context, it is essential to recognise that the promotion of organic consumption should not be limited to marketing campaigns geared toward individual benefit, but should be complemented with sustainability education strategies that highlight the collective contribution of these practices. It has been demonstrated that consumers are more inclined to adopt a responsible consumption mindset when they are able to discern the repercussions of their decisions in terms of environmental preservation and social justice [9]. This is particularly pertinent in the context of university students, who not only constitute a growing market segment but also have the potential to become social leaders capable of propagating sustainable practices within their respective communities.

The present article aims to analyse university students' intention to consume organic foods from a perspective oriented towards sustainability and consumer education. The objective of the research is to provide empirical evidence that will facilitate a more profound comprehension of the manner in which factors such as attitude, moral beliefs, and personal identity influence the propensity to consume organic products. Furthermore, the research seeks to elucidate the manner in which these dimensions can be fortified through the implementation of environmental education programmes and institutional strategies. The objective of this study is to demonstrate that the promotion of organic food consumption in universities contributes not only to individual well-being, but also constitutes a fundamental pillar for the construction of healthier, more just, and environmentally responsible societies.

2. Methodology

The present study was conducted using a quantitative approach, based on the need for objective, measurable, and comparable data that allow for a rigorous analysis of university students' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the consumption of organic foods. The quantitative paradigm is widely regarded as the most suitable for this particular type of research, as it facilitates the transformation of complex social phenomena, such as purchase intentions and the motivations behind sustainable consumption, into observable variables that can subsequently be subjected to statistical analysis. This facilitates the identification of behavioural patterns and comparisons with previous studies conducted in other contexts, which grants greater external validity to the findings [1], [2].

The design that was adopted was of a descriptive and cross-sectional nature. The descriptive approach adopted in this study reflects an interest in characterising an emerging phenomenon: namely, the intention to consume organic foods among university students. This approach eschews the manipulation of variables or the establishment of causal relationships, which are typically required in more experimental research designs. This design offers a comprehensive perspective on the predominant trends within the study group, capturing the nuances of the dimensions analysed, including attitude, subjective norm, perceived control, moral norm, and self-identity. In the field of sustainable consumption research, the utilisation of descriptive design has been prevalent, owing to its capacity to furnish an initial diagnosis that serves as a foundation for subsequent explanatory or predictive studies [6].

The cross-sectional nature of the study is predicated on the fact that the data was collected at a single point in time. This methodological decision is of particular pertinence when seeking to assess current perceptions and capture a "state of the art" regarding a social phenomenon that is in a constant state of evolution, such as responsible consumption. By focusing on a specific time period, the study allows for the identification of university students' awareness levels, internalised values, and perceived barriers to consuming organic foods. This approach is intended to provide a representative overview of the attitudes and beliefs that are characteristic of this population in the present context.

The relevance of this design is also linked to the fact that university students constitute a key segment in the transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns. This group is currently undergoing a period of identity formation and the consolidation of values. Consequently, they are particularly sensitive to educational and social influences. As posited by Bissonnette and Contento [7], young people who are provided with unambiguous information and educational experiences pertaining to sustainability have a propensity to incorporate this learning into their quotidian lives, thereby becoming agents of change within their respective communities. From this standpoint, the examination of their perceptions enables us to comprehend prevailing trends and to forecast future behaviours concerning organic consumption.

2.1. Population and sample

The reference population comprised university students from Peru, a group that represents a strategic setting for sustainability research. This group, in addition to being in a stage of habit and value formation, is characterised by its potential as a social multiplier, given that the practices it adopts can be replicated in their family and community circles. The final sample consisted of 402 participants, selected through non-probability convenience sampling. Despite its limitations with regard to representativeness, this technique is well-suited to exploratory social research, particularly in the context of understanding emergent phenomena such as responsible consumption among young people [6], [7].

2.2. Data collection instrument

The collection of data was carried out through the utilisation of a structured questionnaire, the design of which was informed by scales that had previously been validated in studies concerning organic consumption and sustainability [2, 10]. The instrument under review consisted of a total of twenty-two items, organised around six core dimensions that allow for a broad and comprehensive understanding of consumption intentions.

Firstly, the consumption intention dimension was included, with the objective of identifying students' future willingness to purchase organic foods and incorporate them into their habitual dietary intake. Furthermore, the participants' purchasing attitudes were assessed, defined as their positive or negative evaluation of the consumption of these products. It is acknowledged that favourable attitudes are frequently associated with a heightened propensity to take action.

The questionnaire also addressed subjective norms, which explore the perceived influence of close social role models such as family, friends, and classmates on young people's purchasing decisions. Consequently, the dimension of perceived behavioural control was incorporated with the objective of assessing students' perceptions of their economic capacity and the level of accessibility to organic products. In light of the acknowledgement that, despite the presence of positive attitudes and intentions, price or availability barriers can impede tangible action, the instrument incorporated a moral norm. The objective of this moral norm was to ascertain the extent to which students regarded the consumption of organic foods as an ethically and socially valuable action. This moral norm was designed to be linked not only to individual well-being, but also to collective care and environmental sustainability. Finally, the instrument included the dimension of self-identity, which assessed the extent to which participants recognised themselves as consumers committed to sustainable lifestyles, thereby reinforcing the coherence between their beliefs, values, and daily practices.

A five-point Likert-type scale was utilised to record responses, with options ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The utilisation of this format facilitated a more precise documentation of students' nuanced perspectives and an assessment of their degree of internalisation of values associated with responsible consumption. This provided a substantial foundation for the analysis of perceptions surrounding the consumption of organic food in the university setting.

2.3. Procedure

The administration of the questionnaire was conducted virtually, utilising online forms, thereby enabling the participation of a substantial number of students from diverse academic institutions. The collection of data was undertaken with the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality, and participation was voluntary, with no financial incentives. In addition to meeting ethical standards, this procedure aligns with prevailing practices in contemporary research on sustainable consumption and consumer education. These practices place significant emphasis on digital accessibility and respect for participant autonomy [5, 11].

2.4. Data analysis

The data were then collated and arranged into frequency distribution tables. A descriptive univariate analysis was then performed, based on absolute and relative frequencies (%). This methodological approach facilitates the identification of central tendencies and the exploration of the distribution of responses in each dimension, thereby providing a clear perspective on the students' prevailing perceptions and attitudes.

Despite the fact that the present study concentrated on a descriptive analysis, the results lay the groundwork for future research integrating multivariate analysis models, such as structural equation modeling (SEM), to more precisely understand the relationships between psychosocial factors, environmental education, and sustainable consumption intentions [4, 6].

2.5. Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the fundamental ethical principles that govern the social sciences. The confidentiality of the information and the anonymity of the participants were guaranteed. The

participants were informed of the research purpose and participated voluntarily. Furthermore, any type of coercion or financial incentive with the potential to influence participation was avoided.

3. Results and Discussion

The results obtained from the questionnaire demonstrate that the majority of university students express a positive intention to consume organic foods, which translates into a strong willingness to incorporate them into their eating habits. This finding corroborates the notion that young people, being in a stage of value formation and identity construction, are particularly receptive to adopting responsible and sustainable consumption habits, in line with previous studies [2], [6].

With regard to purchasing attitudes, the results demonstrate a predominantly favourable perception of organic foods, underpinned by the recognition of their health and environmental benefits. This positive attitude has been shown to be a fundamental predictor of consumption intentions, a finding that aligns with international research emphasising the pivotal role of individual perceptions in shaping sustainable purchasing behaviours [5, 12].

With regard to subjective norms, it was observed that social influences play an important role, with students tending to consider the opinions of their immediate surroundings – family, friends, and peers – when making purchasing decisions. This finding aligns with the notion of sustainable consumption as a social phenomenon, wherein individual practices are heavily influenced by collective and socialisation dynamics.

The concept of perceived behavioural control was found to be somewhat equivocal, with students expressing a willingness to purchase organic foods, yet concurrently identifying obstacles pertaining to product cost and accessibility. This tension between purchasing intention and actual purchasing capacity reflects one of the most significant challenges to strengthening the organic market in Latin American contexts, where young consumers may face significant economic limitations [3].

Moreover, the dimensions of moral norms and self-identity proved to be of particular relevance in the present study. Participants recognised that the consumption of organic foods is an ethically and socially valuable practice, linked to collective well-being and environmental protection. Furthermore, a significant proportion of students identified themselves as consumers who seek lifestyles consistent with sustainability principles. These findings are consistent with those reported by Hwang [8] and Khan, Hameed, and Akram [9], who emphasise that organic consumption is not limited to individual benefit, but also constitutes a form of self-expression and social commitment.

The results of the study indicate that sustainability education exerts a significant influence on the reinforcement of responsible consumption practices. It has been demonstrated that students who have been exposed to a greater volume of environmental and health-related content have been found to exhibit more positive attitudes and stronger consumption intentions. This finding suggests that universities, as comprehensive educational institutions, have the capacity to enhance environmental awareness and promote the adoption of practices aligned with the SDGs, particularly SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption.

The findings indicate that the consumption of organic food among university students is influenced by a combination of cognitive, social, moral, and identity-related factors. Despite the barriers related to economic accessibility, the favourable intention and ethical appreciation of sustainable consumption represent significant opportunities for the design of educational programmes and institutional policies aimed at promoting healthier and more environmentally responsible lifestyles.

4. Conclusions

The present study identified that university students expressed favourable consumer intentions towards organic foods, a propensity that was supported by positive attitudes, perceptions of social responsibility, and the construction of an identity linked to sustainable lifestyles. The findings of this study demonstrate that young

people constitute a strategic group for the promotion of responsible consumption. This is not only due to their current role as consumers, but also due to their potential to become agents of change within their communities.

The findings indicate that, despite the challenges posed by economic and availability constraints, moral and identity factors serve to reinforce the inclination towards sustainable consumption. This suggests that universities and other educational institutions have the opportunity to play a key role in developing conscious consumers through environmental education programmes, awareness-raising projects, and institutional policies aimed at promoting healthier and more environmentally friendly diets.

Moreover, it is concluded that the consumption of organic foods should not be understood solely as an individual decision, but as a social and cultural practice that combines ethical values, perceptions of collective well-being, and socialization processes. In this sense, the enhancement of sustainability education is imperative to ensure that students' intentions translate into effective behaviours, capable of contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption.

In conclusion, the results of the present study establish a foundation for subsequent research that will explore the interactions between education, sustainability, and responsible consumption in greater depth. Subsequent studies could incorporate comparative methodologies across different university contexts, as well as more complex explanatory models that allow for an understanding of the relationship between structural factors, individual motivations, and sustainable consumption practices. Consequently, this approach facilitates the development of more comprehensive strategies that promote not only the consumption of organic foods, but also the consolidation of more just, healthy, and environmentally responsible societies.

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