

Exploring the Relationship between Attitude and Purchase Intention Towards Organic Food – does ‘Willingness to Pay’ Mediate the Effect?

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Abstract—The empirical study focuses on the market for organic food to identify the key factors that influence attitude of customers towards such products. Furthermore, it ascertains whether attitude has an influence on purchase intention. The role of ‘willingness to pay’ as mediating variable is also studied. The investigation is based on 446 respondents which is collected using questionnaire. Structural equation modeling is applied using Smart PLS. The study shows that consciousness about health, environment and quality have positive and significant influence on attitude. More interestingly, willingness to pay is found to have a partial mediating effect between attitude and purchase intention. The findings of the study can contribute towards building a sustainable environment.

Keywords: Attitude, Purchase Intention, Mediation, Organic food

INTRODUCTION

The world today is crippled with the issue of environmental sustainability. To handle this problem, one of the possible ways to mitigate it is increasing the production of organic food which is eco-friendly (Basha et al., 2015). The need for environmental sustainability is getting increasing attention by policy-makers, regulators and marketers. Hence, there is an increasing focus on the production of these foods of high nutritional value (Husic-Mehmedovic et al., 2017) which cause less environmental degradation as well (Ganglmair-Wooliscroft & Wooliscroft, 2016).

The Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 aim to protect the planet by the sustainable use of resources. In line with this development, the recent years have been witnessing an increasing interest in organic food with an annual growth of 10-12

percent, though with wide variations across countries. However, the trend shows slow penetration in the third-world countries (Rana & Paul, 2017). But, the rise in percentage of land used for organic farming shows change in the market perception and outlook towards these products (Hughner et al., 2007). The global picture shows that consumption of such products in developing countries is far behind those of the developed countries (Kushwah et al., 2019). However there is a silver lining to this. Almost one-third of the world’s total production of organic food takes place in the emerging economies (Yadav, 2016), of which India holds the maximum share (Yadav & Pathak, 2016). However, it is sad to note that due to minimum domestic demand of such products, a huge portion is exported by India to the foreign countries (Hindu, 2010). But, noticeably, in recent times, there is a slow upward trend in the consumption of organic food in India also which is mainly due to the improvement in consumers’ awareness level and social knowledge (Chekima et al., 2017; Gomiero, 2018).

No matter how much is the growth rate, the reality is that the market of organic food products is far lower than that of the inorganic one (Gupta & Ogden, 2009) even though there is an uptrend. This rising curve is due to the increasing focus on sustainable environment due to the ill-effects arising from the consumption of inorganic food apart from the eco-friendly tag attached with organic food products (Dowd & Burke, 2013). Consumers have also become more concerned about food safety and quality which are driving the escalating demand (Vindigni et al., 2002). Moreover, the general populace has understood that the practice of organic farming gives benefits to the environment and society in the long-term (Guzman & Alonso, 2008). The other reasons that can be attributed include the rising environmental concern and activism

from environmentalists across the globe which has become stronger with growing negative perception about the adverse effect of modern agricultural practices (Taufique & Vaithianathan, 2018). Moreover, the lack of ecological welfare from the increasing use of inorganic/synthetic food adds to the seriousness of the development (Tandon et al., 2021). Thus, consumers are slowly moving away from inorganic products to the consumption of organic food items which are evident from the growing number of retail outlets that exclusively sell such food products and an increase in the shelf-space allocated for organic food in the stores (Kim, 2019).

There are several initiatives that are being taken by governments of various European countries to promote the production and marketing of organic food. In India, an initiative in this line was taken in 2006 when a 'chemical free' initiative was taken in the state of Sikkim. Though, that was a very pro-healthy and environment friendly initiative, it is observed that even in recent times, the share of production of organic food is merely two percent (Basha & Lal, 2018). However, the United Nations in 2016 noted the potential in India to become one of the biggest markets of organic food in the world though presently it is far behind in terms of its market demand and the use of land for producing organic food. Moreover, with increasing concerns about environmental pollution, health issues and food quality in the country, it is desirable to move towards environmentally sustainable practices. Hence, it comes as a surprise because despite the increasing awareness regarding health, environment and sustainability, the market for organic food experiences minimal growth. Therefore, in this backdrop, it becomes imperative to understand the attitude of consumers and identify the key factors that influence their attitudinal level. This knowledge will guide marketers in their strategic design and also give the framework for proposing supportive government policies that will also promote environmental sustainability. This study is relevant as not much research has been done in India (Singh & Verma, 2017).

The present research looks at the attitude and purchase behavior of customers and the role of willingness to pay between these two constructs. The term attitude is about the enduring beliefs of an individual towards a particular object that has its reflection in the response in a preferential manner (Soloman et al., 2006). It creates a long-lasting impact in the minds of consumers that affects the buying behavior towards the product/service. It is also about the psychological make-up of a person towards the object or an intangible element. Purchase intention implies the preference of an individual that

leads him to buy or not to buy a product/service (Hill & Lynchehaun, 2002).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The demand for organic products in the market has rapidly expanded over the past two decades (Greene et al., 2010). Consumers show their concern on health and nutritional value which are the two reasons behind choosing organic foods. However, there is no scientific evidence that states organic foods are nutritionally superior over conventionally grown foods (Akhondan et al., 2015; Williams, 2002) and therefore creates a dubious attitude towards such food. While there is some evidence to state that organically grown foods do possess slightly higher nutrient content, this difference is not enough to state that organic foods provide additional health benefits to consumers (Kouba, 2003). In this regard, researchers have noticed a trend among consumer attitudes and purchasing intention such as concerns with health, the environment, food quality and a positive attitude towards organic food (Dumea, 2012; USDA Organic Market Overview, 2016). The extant literature shows far less number of studies in respect of India. It is true that the market for organic food is on the rise in our country, but the pace is much lower in relation to the other developed countries. Hence, this study aims to address the issues that play an influential role in the buying behavior of consumers towards organic food.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The present study considers the Theory of Planned Behavior, a popular model developed by Ajzen in 1991 in consumer behavior. It is a theoretical framework that determines the factors that affect buying intention of products or services. The model considers the role of three variables viz. attitude, subjective norms and behavioral control to determine the effect of these constructs on human behavior towards organic food, though mainly in foreign countries (Liobikiene et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2018). As per the model framework, attitude (which is influenced by behavioral beliefs) pertains to the evaluation in a positive or negative sense, subjective norms (which is influenced by normative beliefs) point to the effect of peers and society on the behavior of an individual and perceived behavioral control (which is influenced by control beliefs) is related to the ease or difficulty of performing a particular behavior which is influenced by previous experience and impediments in performing in a particular way. Though this is a standard model, researchers have made modifications by inclusion of new constructs. Asif et al. (2018) finds the key role of not just

attitude but also health consciousness and awareness in influencing purchase intention. However, there are many studies that still consider the original model and find its relevance in attitudinal studies (Wu & Chen, 2014; Han & Kim, 2010). The researchers in this empirical study identify the key influencers of attitude in the Indian context and also aim to identify the role of 'willingness to pay' as a mediating variable between attitude and purchase intention. Though several studies are done in foreign countries, the number is relatively much lower in India. The investigators thus consider the extended form of the TPB model as discussed below.

The hypotheses formulation is elaborated below.

a. Environmental consciousness has significant effect on attitude.

The present consumption as observed in different countries shows the increasing interest of consumers towards eco-friendly products. This trend has been mainly because of the issues of environmental damage that mankind has been causing to the environment. This change has brought about a change in the way products are being marketed especially with regard to food products. The impactful role of the media (including social media) has brought about a change in the level of environmental consciousness in the mind of customers who are also negatively influenced by external developments which has resulted in the lifestyle and consumption pattern (Park & Oh, 2005). There is an increasing tendency to purchase products that have not been through environment-damaging process. A higher level of eco-consciousness has positive impact on eco-conscious activities which is due to a change in the attitude towards environment-friendly products (Lee, 2003). This environment-friendly mentality impacts the consumption level of environment-friendly products (Jung, 2009). Few studies also find a close relationship between interest towards the environment and actual action for protecting the environment (Stern et al., 1993; Rice et al., 1996). Thus, based on the above consideration, the alternative hypothesis is:

H1a: Environmental consciousness of consumers has significant effect on attitude towards organic food.

b. Quality consciousness has significant effect on attitude.

The perception that a food product is organic creates an impression that it must be healthier and pro-environment which in turn creates a positive attitude towards the product (Kusumaningsih et al., 2019). One of the factors that lead to increasing market for such product is the issue of quality (Gifford & Bernard, 2006). There is a notion among customers that organic food products are

more nutritious (Lea & Worsley, 2005), safer (Padel & Foster, 2005), tastier (Baker et al., 2004). The study by Magnusson et al. (2003) finds this quality aspect to be among the key drivers of positive attitude towards a product. Thus, it can be assumed that an improved level of quality consciousness results in an increased positive attitude. Thus, based on these considerations, the alternative hypothesis for the study is as follows:

H1b: Quality consciousness of consumers has significant effect on attitude towards organic food.

c. Health consciousness has significant effect on attitude.

The easy access to information due to internet, role of media and activists and the overall rise in the education level have brought a change in the level of sensitivity towards the environment as directly impact health. This change has brought about a change in the way advertisements are placed before the market. Health conscious consumers take actions that ensure good health in the long-term (Newsom et al., 2005). Thus, awareness about health influences the attitude towards products like organic food which during the course of their processing follow environmental practices and it is a very strong driver that leads to purchase of organic products. This increasing consciousness drives the consumption of organic food (Lockie et al., 2002; Chen, 2009). In fact, the organically-produced food is considered to be better for health (Chen, 2009) that has a strong impact on attitude which in turn has an effect on buying intention (Chen, 2009; Cabuk et al, 2014). However, Tarkiainen and Sundqvist (2005) find no impact of this factor on attitude. On the basis of the above observations, the alternative hypothesis is:

H1c: Health consciousness of consumers has significant effect on attitude towards organic food.

d. Attitude has positive and significant influence on purchase intention.

Individual's behavioral attitude means the degree to which an individual evaluates a behavior as desirable or undesirable (Yadav & Pathak, 2016). Attitude which is referred to a person's viewpoint toward an intended action has significant effect on a person's behavior and when it is health-related, the relationship is more intense. In any case, doing or not doing behavior is related to the judgment of the individual. It is necessary that individuals see the results of evaluation and if they have a positive belief towards an object, it may ultimately lead to an intention to purchase. Also, Balderjan (1988) emphasizes that healthy lifestyle exerts effect on the intention to purchase and use environmentally-friendly products.

Social psychologists believe that studying attitudes to understand purchase behavior is crucial. Ranjbar and Omid (2004) consider behavioral attitudes and changes in behavior as a requirement to understand the purchase intention. Accordingly, the hypothesis can be expressed as follows:

H2: Consumers' attitude towards organic food has significant effect on purchase intention.

e. Willingness to pay plays a significant mediating role between attitude and purchase intention.

It is observed that positive attitude of an individual does not always get converted to a buying behavior. Thus, it questions our general idea in this line. One of the possible reasons is the unwillingness to pay for the product despite having a positive attitude. The works by Lopez- Mosquera et al. (2014) and Iranmanesh et al. (2019) show that a

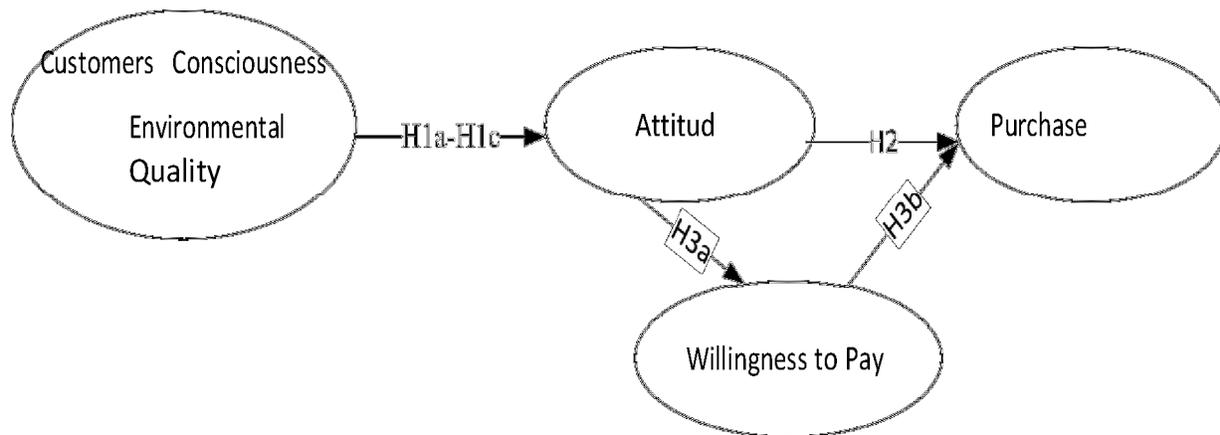
positive attitude leads to a higher willingness to pay for the product/service. Thus, positive state of mind results in a direct or indirect response which in these two cases gets reflected by way of lower resistance even if the price is comparatively more. In this study, willingness to pay is considered as an intervening variable. In fact, this is a prevalent approach in consumer behavior studies as it captures the significance of interfering variable between the antecedent and outcome (Aguinis et al., 2017). On the basis of the above observations, the alternative hypothesis is:

H3a: Attitude has a significant effect on willingness to pay.

H3b: Willingness to pay has significant effect on purchase intention.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers considered the following model:

Figure-1: The Research Framework



Source: Conceptualized by researchers

SAMPLING DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The research is mainly based on primary data. For the present study, data is collected with the use of a structured close-ended questionnaire, which is designed for the purpose. The responses are collected on a 5-point Likert scale. The multi-stage sampling method is applied in selecting the samples for this empirical study. The first stage sampling unit is the state of West Bengal. The second stage sampling unit comprises of the districts in the state. In selecting the six districts, random sampling method is followed. The third stage sampling unit comprises of the blocks selected from each of the districts. Three blocks have been chosen from each of these districts. On an average, thirty three responses have been collected from each of these blocks. Thus, the structured questionnaire was distributed among 594 respondents, out of which

response sheets were returned by 492 respondents which translates to a response rate of 82.83%. However, it was observed that 34 response sheets were erroneous or incompletely filled which were, therefore, not considered for analysis. Furthermore, outliers were identified using Cook's distance as per which if this distance exceeds three times the mean, then those responses are considered as an outlier and therefore not considered. In this analysis, twelve responses were identified as outliers and, therefore, not considered in the final sample. Hence, the findings are based on analysis of 446 responses.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

This part of the study gives an understanding about the sample considered for this research.

Table-1: Demographic profile of respondents

Age	%	Domicile	%	Monthlyincome	%
18-25	23.99%	Rural	35.43%	Upto Rs. 10,000	33.18%
26-40	37.44%	Semi-urban	25.56%	Rs. 10,001-Rs. 25,000	22.65%
More than 40	38.57%	Urban	39.01%	Rs. 25,001- Rs 50,000	31.84%
Gender	%	Educationqual.	%	Rs. 50,001 andabove	12.33%
Male	60.76%	Upto Secondary	7.40%	Profession	%
Female	39.24%	Upto Highersecondary	11.66%	Student	18.39%
Maritalstatus	%	Upto graduation	45.74%	Businessman	24.66%
Married	8.52%	Upto post-graduation	33.63%	Govt. employee	30.72%
Marriedwith children	56.50%	Professional degree	1.57%	Pvt. Sectoremployee	15.92%
Unmarried	34.98%	--	--	Homemaker	10.31%

Source: Primary survey

Measurement of Reliability and Validity

The measurement model was established through reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2014). The value of Cronbach’s alpha (α) should be greater than 0.6 (Bag & Roy, 2019) for ensuring reliability of the research

instrument. And for validity of the instrument, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) should exceed 0.5 and 0.7 respectively. The computed values are given in table 2 which shows that all the values meet the acceptable criteria and hence the measurement model is reliable and valid.

Table-2: Measurement of construct reliability and validity

First OrderCon-structs	Items	Cronbach’s alpha (α)	AVE	Factor Loading	CR
Attitude	AT1	0.841	0.681	0.896	0.895
	AT2			0.767	
	AT3			0.752	
	AT4			0.876	
EnvironmentalCon-sciousness(ENVC)	EVNC1	0.825	0.588	0.822	0.877
	EVNC3			0.754	
	EVNC5			0.799	
	EVNC6			0.755	
	EVNC8			0.698	
Quality Consciousness (QULT)	QULT1	0.858	0.586	0.896	0.893
	QULT2			0.868	
	QULT3			0.667	
	QULT4			0.722	
	QULT5			0.629	
	QULT6			0.774	

Health Consciousness (HC)	HC1	0.921	0.717	0.832	0.938
	HC2			0.840	
	HC3			0.888	
	HC4			0.746	
	HC6			0.879	
	HC8			0.888	
Purchase Intention(PI)	PI2	0.823	0.649	0.784	0.863
	PI3			0.842	
	PI5			0.789	
	PI6			0.808	
Willingness to Pay (WNP)	WNP4	0.660	0.588	0.7012	0.811
	WNP5			0.7931	
	WNP8			0.8035	

Source: Computed by researchers

Table-3: Discriminant Validity (1): Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlation (HTMT)

Construct	Attitude	EVNC	QULT	HC	PI	WNP
Attitude						
EVNC	0.446					
QULT	0.435	0.579				
HC	0.411	0.330	0.195			
PI	0.252	0.258	0.327	0.061		
WNP	0.442	0.348	0.637	0.087	0.586	

Source: Computed by researchers

The Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) correlation ratio is used to check the discriminant validity of the constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). With regard to the significant discrimination among the constructs, HTMT correlation ratio should be lower than the threshold level of 0.85 (Bag & Omrane, 2020; Henseler et al., 2016). Table-3 portrays that correlation ratio of all the constructs are below the threshold level. Thus, discriminant validity is established.

Table-4: Discriminant Validity (2): Fornell-Larcker criterion

Construct	Attitude	EVNC	QULT	HC	PI	WNP
Attitude	0.681					
EVNC	0.142	0.588				
QULT	0.155	0.264	0.586			
HC	0.139	0.087	0.043	0.717		
PI	0.050	0.043	0.072	0.002	0.649	
WNP	0.109	0.061	0.205	0.003	0.218	0.588

Source: Computed by researchers

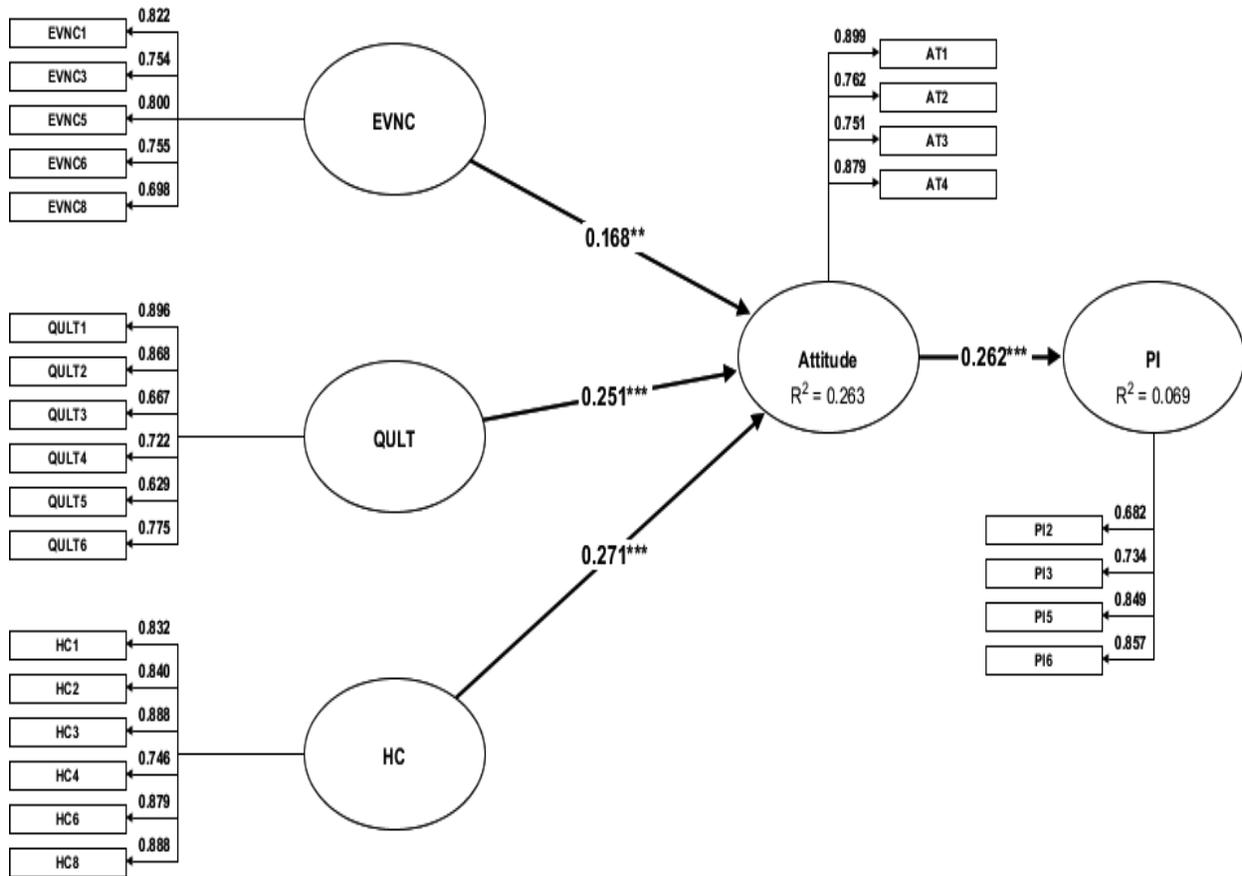
Besides the above, Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion is also estimated. According to this criterion, the square root of AVE for each variable should be more than the correlation between latent variables (Al-Marroof & Al-Emran, 2018). By looking at the computed values in table-4, it can be said that the Fornell-Larcker criterion is fulfilled, thereby indicating that discriminant validity holds true in the present study.

Structural Model Evaluation

The explanatory power of the model can be evaluated by measuring the discrepancy amount in the dependent variables of the model (Bag, et al., 2020; Al-Marroof & Al-Emran, 2018). The values of R-squared and path coefficients are the most important measures for evaluating the structural model (Hair, et. al., 2014). As shown in figure 2, the model has a R-squared value of 26.4%. The results of path analysis show the significance of different paths along with the coefficient of independent constructs. H1a ($\beta = 0.168, p < 0.05$) represents the

path between environmental consciousness and attitude. The result indicates that the consumers' environmental consciousness has significant effect on attitude and it also enhances the attitude towards organic food. H1b ($\beta = 0.251, p < 0.05$) shows the path between quality consciousness and attitude. It indicates that the effect is not just significant but also the level of quality consciousness has positive impact on consumers' attitude towards organic food. H1c ($\beta = 0.271, p < 0.05$) demonstrates the path between consumers' health consciousness and attitude which shows that this dimension also has a significant influence on the attitude of consumers towards organic food. H2 ($\beta = 0.262, p < 0.05$) which represents the path between attitude and purchase intention indicates that consumers' attitude has positive impact on intention to purchase organic food. Furthermore, the model fitness is assessed using Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) which has a value of 0.081 which is less than the criterion value of 0.10 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Henseler et al., 2014) and therefore makes the model acceptable.

Figure-2: Results of the proposed model



Source: Based on researchers' computation

Table-5: Results of testing of hypotheses

Hypotheses	Path	Path Coefficient	p-value	Remarks
H1a	EVNC -> Attitude	0.168	0.001	Supported
H1b	QULT -> Attitude	0.251	0.000	Supported
H1c	HC -> Attitude	0.271	0.000	Supported
H2	Attitude -> PI	0.262	0.000	Supported

Source: Computed by researchers

The results show that attitude of the consumers is influenced by three important factors namely, environmental consciousness, quality consciousness and health consciousness. It is also revealed from the coefficient values and significance level that consumers' health consciousness has maximum influence on the attitude of consumers followed by quality consciousness and environmental consciousness. These are very relevant findings in today's context as the findings can provoke companies to come up with game-changing strategies in order to penetrate the market.

Examining the Mediation Effect

In figure-3, the researchers look at the effect of attitude on purchase intention indirectly via willingness to pay (which is the mediating variable). The analysis shows that the value of R-squared is 22.9%. On comparison of this value with the previously computed R-squared value (shown in figure 2), it is observed that there is substantial improvement in the co-efficient of determination thereby pointing to a rise in the explanatory power of the model. More importantly, the mediating variable is also found to

be significant at 1% level. Thus, the variable 'willingness to pay' is found to play a significant role as a mediator in the relationship between attitude and purchase intention.

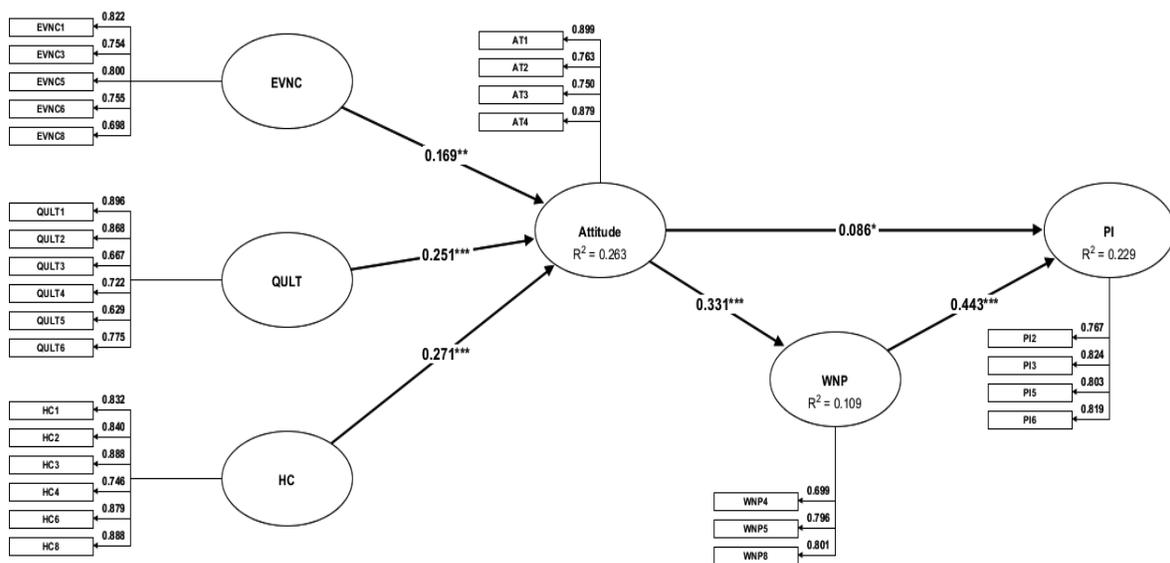
Table-6: Results of testing of hypotheses relating to mediation analysis

Path	Path Coefficient	p-value	Remarks
Attitude -> WNP	0.331	0.000	H3a Supported
WNP -> PI	0.443	0.000	H3b Supported
Attitude -> PI	0.086	0.018	H2 Supported

Source: Computed by researchers

In respect of path analysis, figure-3 and table-6 give the details about the findings relating to mediation analysis where 'willingness to pay' is the mediating variable. The above table shows the different paths of the model, path coefficients and p-values against each hypothesis. It is clear from the results that all the alternative hypotheses are supported which implies that all paths of the proposed model between the independent and dependent variables are significant. Since, this section of the study explores the effect of the mediating variable focus of interest is on the two paths viz. Attitude -> WNP and WNP -> PI. As evident from the results, the cause-effect relationship in both the cases is found to be significant at 1% level with the respective path coefficients being 0.330 and 0.467 respectively. The findings show that the alternative hypothesis (H3) is supported. Furthermore, the model fit is assessed using Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) whose computed value is 0.084 which is less than the threshold value of 0.1 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Henseler et al., 2014), thereby indicating fitness of the model.

Figure-3: To study the impact of 'willingness to pay' as a mediator



Source: Based on researchers' computation

Table-7: Mediation effect between attitude and purchase intention

Path	Path coeff.	Effect	
p1 → p2	0.331	Indirect	Direct
p2 → p3	0.443	0.14663	0.23263
p1 → p3	0.086	Total Effect = Direct effect + Indirect effect	
Measure of mediation effect		Ratio of indirect effect to total effect	63%

Source: Computed by researchers

Note: p1= Independent Variable (Attitude), p2= Mediating Variable (Willingness to Pay), p3= Dependent Variable (Purchase Intention)

From table 6, it can be concluded that ‘willingness to pay’ acts as a mediator between attitude and purchase intention because all the paths (p12, p23 and p13) are significant. Table no. 7 shows that the extent of mediation effect is 63%. Thus, the computations support that ‘willingness to pay’ acts as a partial mediator between attitude and purchase intention.

CONCLUSIONS

The literature provides support to the fact that organic food production is one of the ways to create a sustainable environment. The purchase intention of organic products to preserve the environment and maintain the health of individuals and society has become one of the essential issues in India. Government and companies in India have not been serious about this issue so far and the production and consumption of organic products have not been well-established in the society. The available evidence supports the consumers’ belief that organic food production and consumption result in lower pesticide exposure and also produces products that are more environmentally friendly and better for animal welfare.

The study taken up focuses on an issue that has gained the attention of policymakers and corporate worldwide. The researchers focus on the attitude and purchase intention of customers towards organic food. The empirical work is carried out on the basis of primary survey done on the basis of research questionnaire. The study points that consumers have positive attitude towards organic food which is mainly due to rising health, environment and food quality awareness. In fact, the research finds that these three issues have an influence on attitude of consumers towards organic food. Thus, in order to increase the market size of organic food and higher growth of this industry, there should be emphasis on creating consciousness that will in turn create positive attitude towards such product and this in turn will lead to increased purchase intention. However, an interesting finding from the study is that ‘willingness to pay’ plays an important role as a mediator in the relationship between attitude and purchase intention.

Thus, an increasing willingness creates a higher level of intention to purchase organic food.

On the basis of this empirical research work, it is suggested that the marketers have an important role in generating positive attitude towards organic food in the minds of buyers and advertisements should highlight the key issues about health, environment protection and product- quality related to organic food. The government should set up a body that will certify the quality of the organic food (like the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India in the case of food products) and there is a need to launch mass advertisement campaigns to promote such foods in such a way that people are ready to shell out little more money in order to enjoy the benefits associated with organic food.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

The future endeavours can aim to do an analysis on the basis of demographical features. Moreover, there can be other mediating variables that can be considered. For further extension, demographic characteristics can be taken as moderating variables and accordingly the study can be done.

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