Factors That Influence Perceptions and Purchasing of Organic Produce by South African Consumers: A Literature Review

Geraldene Fynn-Green, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Roger B Mason, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

Andrea Giampiccoli, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article provides insight into the literature on consumer perceptions towards organic fruit and vegetables, attempting to identify factors that influence purchasing practices. Several supermarkets and fresh food markets in South Africa are now selling organically produced food items and consequently provide consumers with an alternative to conventionally grown food. However, limited research has been conducted in South Africa regarding consumer awareness and knowledge pertaining to organic produce and how consumer perceptions affect their purchasing practices. This article therefore provides a background to the organic food market in South Africa. From available literature, the article then goes on to explain the consumer behavior related to purchasing organic food produce, specifically with regard to socio-economic demographics and factors influencing willingness to pay a premium for organic produce. The article culminates in suggestions for further research to improve knowledge and understanding of the organic produce consumer in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

Consumer behavior, consumer perceptions, fruit and vegetables, organic produce, purchasing practice

INTRODUCTION

Many people see organic products as being tastier or healthier than those coming from conventional agriculture, while others appreciate them because of the good practices applied towards the environment or the Labor force employed on organic farms (Wels, 2014; European Commission, 2016). These positive perceptions of the quality and safety of organic foods and of the positive environmental impact of organic agricultural practices have been evident for many years, encouraging the growing demand for organic foods (Vindigni, Janssen, & Jager, 2002). A variety of factors that can impact organic fruit and vegetable consumption have been recognized in the literature; for example, a customers’ socio-economic attributes (gender, age, income and education level) and also the level of consumer perceptions and awareness of product taste, price, freshness and size (Owusu & Anifori,
2013). Worldwide, organically produced food has gained popularity and is rapidly becoming one of the fastest growing product categories in the food industry, with the organic market moving from a niche to a mainstream market (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2012). The trend towards consumer preference for local, organic produce in industrialized countries has only recently emerged in developing countries (Bienabe, Vermeulen, & Bramley, 2011). According to Kelly & Meterlekamp (2015), organic farming in African countries is expanding, but in South Africa there are few success stories. Demand outstrips supply, with small organic farmers struggling to meet the strict requirements of most retailers. Large farmers have not filled the demand-supply gap and so the potential of the market is not being achieved.

This paper provides insight into South African consumers’ beliefs and attitudes towards organic fruit and vegetables, highlighting the main concerns held by people who purchase organic rather than conventional products, namely status, health and environmental factors. A few examples of important research in this field in some countries are the United States of America (Williams & Hammitt, 2000; Huang, 1996); The Netherlands (Hack, 1993), Germany (Von Alvensleben, 1998), Bangladesh (Iqbal, 2015), Romania (Oroian et al., 2017) and New Zealand (Saunders, 1999, as cited in du Toit & Crafford, 2003, p. 1). However, relatively little similar research has been conducted in South Africa (Du Toit & Crafford, 2003; Barrow, 2006; Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2007; Institute of Natural Resources, 2008; Thamaga-Chitja & Hendriks, 2008; Kelly & Meterlekamp, 2015).

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

Objective

This paper aims to establish a starting point for a stream of research in the field of organic produce marketing in South Africa, by presenting a comprehensive literature review on the behavior of consumers towards the purchase of organic fruit and vegetable products.

Research Methodology

Design

This study used secondary research to, first, investigate the organic food sector, globally, in Africa and in South Africa, and second to establish the factors that influence, both positively and negatively, the consumer behavior of adopters of organic fruit and vegetables. The study thus used the deductive method as themes and key words were identified in advance. The study was essentially textual as a substantial body of literature was consulted.

Search Strategy

Following a generic reading of relevant literature, including textbooks, three broad themes were identified, namely, organic farming (the context; including history and global, Africa and South Africa), marketing of organic produce and consumer behavior towards organic produce. Within these themes, a number of key words were identified to guide the search, as illustrated in Table 1:

Selection Criteria and Data Extraction

These keywords were then used to search via Google.com and Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.co.za/) as well as via various databases, such as EBSCO, Emerald and ProQuest, for articles that related to the three themes. Reference lists of each paper were scanned for additional articles. The lead author read and summarized those articles applicable to the themes, and coded them according to the key words. Due to the scarcity of literature on organic produce in South Africa, we did not limit our inclusion criteria.
Table 1. Search themes and key words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Key Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing of organic produce</td>
<td>Organic produce markets, products, price, quality, consumer perceptions, product attributes, health benefits, marketing effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer behavior towards organic produce</td>
<td>Food choice behavior, consumer knowledge, purchase motivation, perceived benefits, socio-demographic profiles, price premium, barriers to purchasing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis**

Since the goal of the review was to produce a descriptive review of the research topic, rather than a conceptual or critical review of the extant literature, a systematic content analysis approach was considered adequate. The review was therefore synthesized using the themes and the key words as organizing principles with the lead author writing a first draft. The co-authors (with expertise in environmentalism, eco-tourism, marketing and retailing) then reviewed the draft independently, making relevant changes and improvements. The final draft was rewritten by one of the co-authors.

**Rigor of Process**

First, a structured process, based on agreed themes and key words, was used to ensure the objectivity of the search process. Second, the review was examined and critiqued at a number of draft stages by all three authors. These two steps are believed to have minimized selection bias.

**ORGANIC MARKET IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Bouagnimbeck and Gama (2014) observe that the development of organic agriculture is now entering a new phase, with policy makers recognizing that organic agriculture has a significant role to play in addressing food insecurity, poverty and climate change in Africa. The Institute of Natural Resources (2008) provides a figure of only 279 certified organic farmers, but due to the lack of formal legislation governing organic agriculture, the actual value and extent of organic agriculture is uncertain.

Formal certified organic farming in South Africa is still relatively small and the organic sector is characterized by a high level of fragmentation. The main differences between organic and conventional farming are that no chemical fertilizers or chemical pesticides can be used on organic crops, and animals raised organically have to be fed on organic or natural sources of feed (Blair, 2012). “In South Africa, organic food is a niche market aimed at consumers in higher wealth groups. Even though the organic food industry in South Africa is still far behind the rest of the world, the sector (local consumption and exports) has shown exceptional recent growth from R5 million in 2003 to R155 million in 2005, at least 80% of which was fresh produce” (Mead, 2006, p. 4).

Certified organic products often fetch premium market prices and their production and marketing could alleviate food insecurity for smallholder farmers (Thamaga-Chitja & Hendriks, 2008). Informal organic farming by smallholder and subsistence producers may feed as much as two-thirds of the population (Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2006). The South African consumer movement towards organic foods is apparent by the growth of the retail organic market over the past ten years, particularly with regard to sales at Woolworths and Pick n Pay, two of South Africa’s largest grocery retailers (Bienabe et al., 2011). Barrow (2006) found that supermarket chains have done much to promote the distribution and consumption of certified organic produce in South Africa. However, Vermeulen and Bienabe (2007, p. 8) determined that “price premiums and consumer behavior analysis associated with organic production reveal significant consumers’ willingness to pay for immaterial product attributes (e.g. health) and reflect the current supply and demand imbalance in the organic sector”.

---

*International Journal of Customer Relationship Marketing and Management*  
**Volume 10 • Issue 2 • April-June 2019**
MARKETING ORGANIC FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

In the US, organic is the fastest growing food sector with organic produce considered highly important to the industry since it is the consumers’ primary introduction to the world of organic food (Dimitri & Dettmann, 2012). Research indicates that amongst the barriers most commonly found, consumers’ lack of information about the ‘attributes’ of organic food products is a constant (Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002; Stolz, Bodini, Stolze, Hamm, & Ritcher, 2009). The factors influencing organic food purchase can be split into egoistic and altruistic purchase motivators. Egoistic and altruistic considerations simultaneously predict consumers’ attitudes and purchase intentions for organic products (Kareklas, Carlson, & Muehling, 2014).

A good way to cultivate the consumption of organic fruits and vegetables in South Africa is to market it at a certain level to consumers. Hill and Lynchenaun (2002) suggest that because of the high prices associated with organic food, consumers perceive organic food to be higher quality than conventionally grown food, which helps shape their perceptions of taste. From a marketing perspective, it is important to stimulate the consumption of organic food products by understanding why consumers consume a certain level of organic food, when and why they change their consumption patterns and how the consumption of organic food can be enhanced (Jager, Janssen, & Vindigni, 2002).

The main challenge lies in broadening the appeal of organic food and establishing a broad consumer base without compromising its identity (Latacz-Lohmann & Foster, 1997). Barriers include consumers’ reluctance to pay the higher costs (not only in money but also in time and effort) usually associated with organic products and their unwillingness to accept sacrifices in the subjectively perceived quality of the organic produce (Sadati, Sadati, Fami, & Tolou, 2010). Purchasers of organic foods believe that these products are superior to conventional foods in terms of quality and safety – for example, Hussain (2017) reports that 94-100% of samples of organic produce were free of pesticides, while only 17-50% of non-organics were pesticide-free. Organic produce purchasers are often prepared to pay a premium for these benefits, but non-purchasers tend to be discouraged by the higher prices (Baryeh, 2015). What is not clear is whether these consumer perceptions are correct (Blair, 2012). Bienabe et al. (2011) have shown price premiums at Woolworths from 18% for vegetables to 112% for tea and coffee.

ORGANIC FRUIT AND VEGETABLE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Consumers’ behavior involves the thoughts and feelings people experience, the actions they perform in consumption, and includes all things from the environment that influence those thoughts, feelings and actions (Peter & Olson, 2009). In order to develop effective marketing strategies, marketers have to research, analyze and understand consumers. According to Chen (2007, p. 1008) “an individual’s food-related personal traits are suspected of playing a moderating role in influencing personal food choice”. Michaelidou and Hassan (2010, p. 131) found “direct relationships between consumer attitudes towards organic food and factors such as food safety concerns, ethical lifestyle and price perceptions”. Table 2 categorizes organic consumers and their consumer behavior.

Wealthier consumers are thought to be the leading target group for organic products because of the related price premium. However, less wealthy consumers tend to spend part of their income on selected luxury items (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2007). The South African “middle class has the income, education and potential interest in alternative quality food products and could contribute to further growth in these markets, especially for the organic food sector in South Africa” (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2007). South Africa is a diverse nation with an extensive range in wealth and cultural groupings in both urban and rural areas who, because of the information era, can relate to the global food environment. It is therefore critical to understand the trends shaping the world when taking a closer look at the South Africa consumer. Although the organic food industry in South Africa is still
Table 2. Organic consumer categories and consumer behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organic consumer groups</th>
<th>Key characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalists</td>
<td>Concerned about environmental quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food phobics</td>
<td>Concerned about chemical residues in food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy eaters</td>
<td>Consumers who, for various (medical or other) reasons, follow particular diet sets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanists (and welfare enthusiasts)</td>
<td>Concerned with ‘factory farming’ methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedonists</td>
<td>Believe that a price premium on a product signals a better product</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


far behind the rest of the world, there has been a significant increase in local consumption of fresh produce since the turn of the century (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2007).

**Human Behavior**

The study of food choice is a complex phenomenon that represents one of the most important parts of human behavior, where several cognitive and behavioral factors can vary sharply between individuals (Babicz-Zielinska, 2001). Consumer behavior does not imply only reasoned action but is essentially a consequence of a consumption-relevant cognitive structure, meaning that a product forms a relationship between the consumer’s self-knowledge and her memory, and a link between her and the product is built (Grunert & Grunert, 1995).

On a daily basis, organic products battle with conventional foods on market shelves, with the decision-making process a consumer embarks on affected by numerous fundamental qualities. ‘Intrinsic’ characteristics are what differentiate organic products from their conventionally produced alternatives (Bonti-Ankomah & Yiridoe, 2006). Reasons for buying could be grouped according to general and commodity-specific concerns. Examples of concerns include food safety, human health and environmental impact, whereas commodity attributes include taste, freshness and packaging (Yiridoe, Bonti-Ankomah, & Martin, 2005). Consumers could perceive organic products as representing an environmentally friendly mode of production, as well as having certain intrinsic quality and safety characteristics (Grzelak, 2011). Additional positive attributes that consumers associate with organic food products include improved taste (Davies et al., 1995, p. 18), being better for the environment (Lea & Worsley, 2005) and superior in terms of quality and safety (Blair, 2012).

Certain attributes, i.e. cleanliness, size, freshness and less insect damage, are qualities of organic fruit and vegetable products theorized to have positive outcomes on willingness to pay (WTP) premiums (Owusu & Aniforji, 2013). Organic “product knowledge is an important factor because it represents the only instrument that consumers have to differentiate the attributes of organic products from those of conventional ones, as well as to form positive attitudes and quality perceptions toward these products” (Gracia & de Magistris, 2007, p. 442).

**Motivations for Purchasing Organic**

Motivations for preferring and purchasing organic produce are many and varied. One of the first taxonomies was developed by Davies et al. (1995). As also shown in Table 1, it classified people who purchase organic food into four groups namely greens - people who are concerned with the environment; food phobics - those who are concerned about chemical residues in food; humanists - people who are preoccupied with factory farming methods; and hedonists - people who believe that premium products must be better and, importantly, taste better. Perceived healthiness, especially of organic fruit and vegetables, is a limitation of quality for various consumers (Pearson, Henryks, & Jones, 2010). In another study, Hill and Lynchehaun, (2002) found that consumers consider, for
Table 3. Main reasons for purchasing organic foods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchase reason</th>
<th>% of respondents in country/region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy for me</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy for my children</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better for the environment</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinder to animals</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from AC Nielsen, 2005.

various reasons, organic food to be more nutritious. Research conducted in Belgium by Mondelaers, Verbeke, and Van Huylenbroeck (2009) maintains that health-related traits were more important than environmental traits in shaping consumer preference for organic vegetables. In Romania, Oroian et al. (2017) found that consumers purchase organic produce because of health concerns, sensory appeal, sustainable consumption and weight concerns. They identified three groups of organic consumers, namely “gourmand”, “environmentally concerned” and “health concerned”. However, despite these beliefs, research does not show that organic produce has significant nutritional or health benefits over conventional produce. For example, Smith-Spangler et al. (2012) identified limited evidence for the superiority of organic foods, with little evidence suggesting marked health benefits from consuming organic versus conventional foods. Furthermore, systematic reviews of published literature failed to find any meaningful evidence of significant differences between nutritional content or nutrition-related health effects resulting from organic produce consumption (Dangour et al., 2009; Dangour et al., 2010).

In a 2002 study conducted in Greece, it was revealed that health was not one of the main motives for purchasing organic but rather the organoleptic qualities of organic food that emerge as important driving forces in both Greece and Italy (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002; Zanol & Naspetti, 2002). Hill and Lynchéau (2002) also allude to the fact that consumers perceive organic food to be fashionable due to the substantial media attention it has received. According to other previous research, better taste and concern for animal welfare are other purchasing motives for organic products, whereas the high price premium is one of the main barriers (Aertsens, Mondelaers, Verbeke, Buyse, & Van Huylenbroeck, 2011; Hughner, McDonough, Prothero, Shultz, & Stanton, 2007). Table 3 provides a simplified summary of these motivations for purchasing organic products.

The presence of an organic label is important in relation to buying intensity. Studies conducted in the USA, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Denmark and New Zealand suggest that habitual buyers of organically produced food are willing to pay higher premiums than consumers buying less frequently (Thompson, 2000). Therefore, it can be assumed that the greater the price, the greater the expectations of quality.

Socio-Demographic Profiles

Attempts to categorize organic food consumers have been varied, with studies by (Chinnici, D’Amico, & Pecorino, 2002; O’Donovan & McCarthy, 2002) finding both poor and encouraging connections between demographic variables and organic food preference. In their study on consumers’ willingness to pay for organic food and the factors that affect it and variation per organic product type along with organoleptic characteristics and prices, Krystallis and Chryssohoidis (2005) report that consumers’ socio-demographic profiles do not constitute powerful determinants of organic purchase. However, Wier, Anderson, and Millock (2003) state that organic food attitudes are influenced by gender, age, income, level of education and the presence of children in the household. To address these anomalies, the main research on socio-demographic characteristics is discussed in the following sections.
Age
Govindasamy, Italia, and Adelaja (2001) showed that younger consumers were willing to pay higher prices for organic products, but Liu, Zeng and Yu (2009) discovered an inverted-U-shaped connection between consumer WTP and age, signifying that the WTP for additive-free foods increases with age but decreases as age increases beyond a threshold age. Thus, age can affect attitudes towards organic food - younger people may be more environmentally conscious but may be less willing to pay more due to lower purchasing power, whereas older people might be more health conscious and therefore willing to pay a premium for organic food (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002, p. 758).

Income
According to Asafu-Adjaye (2000) “income variables - both higher and middle income - are expected to be positively related to the WTP premiums for organic fruits and vegetables compared to conventional fruits and vegetables, in order to agree with economic theory”. Voon, Ngui, and Agrawal (2011) concluded that affordability would positively influence consumers’ WTP for organic foods compared to conventional foods.

Gender
Numerous studies (Davies et al., 1995; Wandel & Bugge, 1997) indicate that women are more interested in organic produce than men are, are more frequent buyers than men and, overall, have a more positive attitude towards organic food. Similar findings were made by Govindasamy et al. (2001). However, Aertssens et al. (2011) imply that the gender relationship may be a lot more complex. They suggest that subjective knowledge is positively correlated with men, who are more confident about their organic knowledge, but that women have a more positive attitude towards organic produce. This may be supported by Davies et al. (1995), who found that men were prepared to pay only marginally less than women did for organic products.

Presence of Children
Barrow (2006) found that parents of young children are becoming increasingly aware of the health risks associated with non-organic and processed/refined foods and consequently seek organically grown food, irrespective of the certification status thereof. Some qualitative studies suggest that “consumers sometimes relate feelings of good conscience and feelings of responsibility for the well-being of one’s family with organic food purchase decisions” (Makatouni 2002, p. 348). The presence of children affects the consumption and purchasing of organic food and is related to their age, meaning the older the children the less chance of purchasing organic food (Wier et al., 2003).

Several studies highlight the presence of children in a household as a meaningful factor that constructively influences consumers’ organic food attitudes as well as purchasing behavior (Fotopoulos & Krystallis, 2002; Iqbal, 2015). However, children’s ages can be considered as a key factor, meaning that the higher the age of children in the household, the lower the propensity to buy organic food (Wier et al., 2003).

Educational Background
Gracia and de Magistris’s (2007) study on organic food purchasing behavior in southern Italy highlighted the fact that consumers with advanced education levels had more knowledge about organic foods. They concluded that people with a higher education level were more likely to have positive attitudes to organic products. According to Wandel and Bugge (1997) consumers that have knowledge of process methods and the production of organics are willing to pay considerably more for organic food. “Higher educated consumers are expected to pay higher price premiums for organic foods since they tend to appreciate issues of preventive health care through the consumption of chemically-free food products better than consumers with no education” (Piyasiri & Ariyawardana, 2002, p. 117). These findings were also supported by Iqbal (2015) in Bangladesh.
Effect of Organic Fruit and Vegetables Marketing

“From a marketing perspective, it is important to understand why consumers consume a certain level of organic food; when they change their consumption pattern; what their motives are, how the consumption of organic food consumption can be enhanced” (Vindigni et al., 2002, p. 625). Amongst the factors that seem to affect consumers’ willingness to pay are specific factors like quality, trust in the certification of the product and brand name (Krystallis & Chryssohoidis, 2005). According to Vindigni et al. (2002), a general understanding of organic as well as globally recognised standards will provide a significant reassurance for consumers to get what they expect. Consequently, “consumer’s lack of knowledge concerning organic food is an important factor slowing down growth” (Aertsens et al., 2011, p. 1353). In developed countries, organic box schemes have been effective in organic produce distribution and in increasing knowledge and trial of organic produce, but such schemes are relatively unknown in South Africa (Thom & Conradie, 2012).

Magnusson, Arvola, Koivisto Hursti, Aberg, & Sjoden (2001) found that another difficulty in the growth of organic food purchasing and consumption is that consumers are content with conventional produce. “However, there is a small but growing interest not only for organic food but also for free-range produce and food purchased at local markets” (Vermeulen & Bienabe, 2007, p. 7). Common obstacles to further growth, identified in marketing literature, include consumers’ reluctance to pay the higher costs, not only in money but also in time and effort, usually associated with organic products. They are also often unwilling to accept sacrifices in the subjectively perceived quality of organic produce (Vindigni et al., 2002; Lea & Worsley, 2005).

Willingness to Pay

Consumer’s link product attributes and results to evaluate a product and make choices. Factors that can influence organic food consumption have been identified in relevant literature and it may be contended that the price issue and willingness to pay is an important factor with regard to organic purchases. Aertsens et al. (2010, p. 1354) found that one of the strongest perceived barriers was overly high prices. Sustainable products are always seen as the more expensive option (Market and Opinion Research International Limited (MORI) 2003). In a paper on food safety and consumers’ willingness to pay for labelled beef, Angulo, Gil, and Tamburo (2003) state that amongst the factors that affect willingness to pay for organic foods were consumers’ use of food labels; experience with the product; and the prices that consumers pay. Results from a study by Liu et al. (2009) relating to WTP for food safety in Beijing revealed that income in relation to consumer WTP for food safety appears to be mixed. While consumer WTP for food safety is adversely connected with the marginal value of money, consumer WTP is expected to increase as the income of the consumer increases. In a study exploring the gap between attitudes and behavior, Padel and Foster (2005, p. 623) reveal that price is not an absolute barrier but is only one factor in a complex decision-making process in which consumers consider price in the context of disposable income and “value for money” and the need to justify a price premium.

Price Premium

Numerous claims are made about the goodness of organic food in order to justify the premium price that consumers have to pay (Filion & Arazi, 2002), and considerable price premium differences even between neighboring countries reflects that organic market transparency is particularly poor (Hamm et al., 2002). In the Total Food Quality Model by Brunso, Fjord, and Grunert (2002), two aspects are particularly relevant for the processing of price information, namely, the cue perception process, which is how consumers perceive prices (price cognition), and the price integration process, which is how consumers evaluate perceived prices. Many consumers may use the price of an organic product as a determining factor - for example, if it costs more it will taste better, last longer or is of superior quality. Price, trust and quality in terms of taste are reported as the main impediments in
the expansion of organics (Tsakiridou, Boutsouki, Zotos, & Mattas, 2008; Mishra & Kaushik, 2013). Ureña, Bernabeu, and Olmeda (2008) found that organic customers are willing to pay an approximately 10% premium for organic food, with an average of 9.5% by women and 11.4% by men. Regular consumers would pay a slightly higher premium of around 15% (an average of 12% by women and 18% by men), while tourists would pay a premium between 30 and 50% depending on age (Pešurić & Damijanić, 2016). Retailers should take the price that consumers are willing to pay and the specific food product/s that they would like to purchase into account when formulating marketing strategies (du Toit & Crafford, 2003). According to the Total Food Quality Model, the intention to buy a certain product is co-determined by perceived costs and expected quality (Brunso et al., 2002). Because price remains one of the main barriers for consumers in purchasing organic food, which is more expensive than conventional food products, consumer willingness to pay would increase if organic food prices were somewhat adjusted, with the existing gap between conventional and organic food prices being reduced to increase demand and thus consumption (Gil, Gracia, & Sanchez, 2000).

Knowledge of Products

The gap between food production and consumption, i.e. between food producers and consumers, has contributed to consumers’ lack of trust in the various actors in the food sector and food production processes (Marian, Chrysochou, Krystallis, & Thøgersen, 2014). Pouratashi (2012), reviewing literature from various European countries (e.g. Germany, Spain, Italy), found that consumer awareness of organic products was high, but that understanding of what was organic, and what was not, was not as high. Overall, it was felt that knowledge was at a medium level. Consumers’ concern with how food products are produced has increased their desire for knowledge and their interest in ‘natural’ production methods, which has stimulated the development and sale of GMO-free, animal welfare-conscious and organic products (Grunert, Bredahl, & Brunso, 2004). In developing countries, however, this may not be true, as Iqbal (2015) found, in Bangladesh, that lack of knowledge and ability to differentiate between organic and traditional foods was a barrier to purchasing organic food.

Basing their research on the Theory of Planned Behavior, Aertsens et al. (2011) showed a positive correlation between subjective knowledge (what individuals think they know) and objective knowledge (what individuals actually know) about organic food production, indicating an accurate understanding of organic produce. Furthermore, both forms of knowledge were positively related to positive attitudes about organic food. They found that such attitudes are influenced by subjective knowledge, membership of an organic organization, motivations and being female. Their findings are illustrated in Figure 1.

As discussed above, ‘price premium’ is seen as a major barrier to adoption of organic products. Although organic food is targeted mainly at consumers in higher wealth groups in South Africa, Vermeulen & Bienabe (2007) maintain that there is a trend amongst less wealthy consumers to spend on selected luxury items within their budget constraints. They maintain that this growing middle class has the income, education and interest to form a significant target market for organic food products. Such potential customers could contribute to further growth for large retailers.

Barriers to Effective Purchasing

Most consumers have a positive attitude towards buying organic products, but they are often constrained by important barriers (Messina, 2003). In their study on the theoretical framework of consumer decision-making regarding organic food consumption, Vindigni et al. (2002) found that the most common barriers to the purchasing of organic produce include consumer reluctance to pay higher costs both in terms of money and in time and effort, and their skepticism regarding the higher quality of these products. These findings are also supported by Mishra & Kaushik (2013). Roddy, Cowan, and Hutchinson (1994) discuss a lack of unique value in the eyes of consumers, whilst Worner and Meier-Ploeger (1999) doubt the product guarantee, lack of promotion and unclear declarations of the organic status. However, the main consensus in terms of obstacles to buying organic food seem to
be the existing price difference and the lack of availability of these products (Lea & Worsley, 2005; Mishra & Kaushik, 2013). Aertsens et al. (2010, p. 1354) also found that the strongest perceived barriers were overly high prices and the lack of availability, with objective and subjective knowledge regarding organic food production showing a positive correlation. “Consumers’ lack of knowledge concerning organic food is an important factor slowing down growth” (Aertsens et al., 2011, p. 1353. The same study also revealed that “higher levels of objective and subjective knowledge concerning organic food are positively related to a more positive attitude towards organic food; greater experience of it; and a more frequent use of information”. Thus knowledge about organic products is important as it is the main method for consumers to differentiate organic from conventional products, especially regarding product quality (Gracia & de Magistris, 2007).

What is clear is that marketers of organic produce cannot rely on price as the only excuse for lack of growth in the sector, but need to investigate and counter a range of possible barriers. Figure 2 provides a model of factors influencing the willingness to purchase agricultural organic products.

**CONCLUSION**

The literature discussed in this paper highlights the importance of organic produce, which is why it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the organic sector in South Africa. The literature provides insight into the beliefs and attitudes towards organic fruit and vegetables of consumers from a variety of countries, highlighting the main concerns that people who purchase organic food have; namely status, health and environment. Consumer willingness to pay (WTP) and perceived reasons influencing purchasing practices were also discussed. This review of the literature has shown that consumption of organic produce is influenced, either positively or negatively, by various demographic factors like age, income, gender, education and presence of children, as well as by knowledge about
organic products and production processes. The characteristics of organic products themselves also influence the decision to purchase, as does the consumer’s attitude towards organic products, often influenced by perceptions of cost, value, quality and effort required to acquire such produce. Thus the literature shows a wide variety of factors that influence purchase of organic products from an international viewpoint, but there is little clarity on the extent that these factors influence such purchase in South Africa. The literature therefore indicates that there is a need to test whether these factors are also relevant in the South African context.

LIMITATIONS

A potential problem is that the topic is relatively under-researched in South Africa, and so some reliance has had to be placed on older literature in order to obtain a broad picture of the South African organic market. However, it is hoped that this review will encourage further research on the topic, which will create a more up-to-date stream of knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite the fact that the literature on organic food is vast, there are still research gaps to be filled to pave the way for further developments in the organic food market in general, in the organic fruit and vegetable market in particular, and especially in South Africa. Possible areas for further research, which will help to expand knowledge on the South African organic produce market, could include empirical studies into:

- South African consumers’ beliefs and attitudes towards organic food,
- Barriers to the purchasing and consuming of organic fruit and vegetables in South Africa, and
- Understanding the concerns that people have that encourage or discourage them from buying and consuming organic food products.
REFERENCES


**ENDNOTES**

1 affecting an organ, especially a sense organ