

EXPLORING TARGET CONSUMER SEGMENTS OF ORGANIC FOODS: INSIGHTS FROM PRODUCERS AND VENDORS IN COLOMBO DISTRICT, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research explains the diversified activities and challenges faced by organic producers and sellers in the local market. Out of a total of 4823 registered sole proprietorships and partnerships from 2021 to 2024, as furnished by the Department of Business Registration in Sri Lanka, a total of 20 organic producers and sellers were identified. They were interviewed to know more about their business operations, and saturation was done with 12 respondents. The data indicate that organic fruit and vegetable vendors (sole proprietors and partnerships) mainly focus on the middle-class group by providing a blend of organic and conventional food items, without focusing only on high-income groups. To cater to this group, vendors and producers offer affordable prices for both organic and conventional foods, thereby making organic options more accessible. However, none of the products were organic-certified, as the retailers relied on customers' personal experiences to differentiate between organic and non-organic products. The bureaucratic complexity and expense of certification processes, along with their emphasis on the domestic rather than the export market, have discouraged individuals from certification. Contrary to the common belief that organic food is not bought by consumers due to its high price, studies show that the affordable works to motivate individuals in the middle and low-income groups to utilize organic foods. Furthermore, studying from the vendors' perspective brings some valuable contributions to the field since many past studies have relied on the consumer perspective. The study finally identifies the need for new marketing segments, as pointed out by small-scale vendors, and the adaptation to the middle and lower income markets is valuable for sustaining the organic market and achieving sustainability goals. Responsible Production and Consumption (SDG 12) and Good Health and Well Being (SDG 3) need to be achieved by 2030.

KEYWORDS: Organic food, Organic producers, Organic sellers, Local market, Middle-class consumers, Certification challenges

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1. INTRODUCTION

The organic sector of Sri Lanka has been experiencing consistent growth in recent years with consumers driven by the practice of moving to green, eco-friendly consumption (Malkanathi, 2021). Organic production based on this practice of abstaining from applying chemical pesticides, chemicals, and genetic modification to agricultural activities is increasingly recognized as a green program compared to conventional farming. Although demand is growing for organic products, however, there are some retarding factors in the way of growth in the local organic market, and one such factor is the cost factor which is important in the organic farming (Malkanathi, 2020). Organic fruits and vegetables in Sri Lanka are viewed as costly because the production cost is high and the process is complicated for obtaining the organic certification (Rathnachandra, 2023; De Silva & Rajapakse, 2023). Pricing, lack of standard procedures, and limited access to certification are other reasons for lowering the consumers' confidence and restricting market growth (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2015). These are along with infrastructure shortages as well as the inadequacy of the supporting infrastructure for organic producers, particularly small-scale operators and retailers (Touch et al., 2024). Insufficient organic input, certified seeds and bio-pesticides, and labour unaffordability are serious obstacles to organic activity growth (Eti, 2025). Another direct threat is the price gap between organic and conventional products (Ozinci et al., 2017). Organic products are often considered premium products, primarily targeting high-income consumers, which limits its potential to expand into the mass market (Grzywinska-Rapca et al., 2025). In addition, consumer unawareness of the advantages of organic food limits future market expansion (Jakubowska et al., 2024). Personal, social, economic, cultural, and psychological motivations for organic food purchasing were identified to have a positive effect on consumption in a consumer survey conducted in Kegalle Divisional Secretariat Division (Priyanath & Dangalla, 2022). But even that uncovered price sensitivity as a hanging concern where consumers are not willing to pay extra for organics (Priyanath & Dangalla, 2022). In achieving solutions for all Given

the above challenges, there is a need for a multi-dimensional strategy that includes establishing supportive policies, providing appropriate training and infrastructure for farmers, strengthening distribution channels, and educating consumers to enhance consumer confidence and increase demand for organic products.. There simply has to be an agreement for it in terms of harnessing the potential of the Sri Lankan organic market as a good, cost-effective alternative within the larger segment of society.

Problem statement

Organic Foods are primarily sold to individuals with high incomes regardless of the common perception that the foods are not within most people's budgets to purchase (Bai et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2020). However, the affordability of organic fruits and vegetables remains an issue, and it seems important to observe whether the current market forces are addressing low and middle-income segments (Watanabe et al., 2020) too since some of the earlier studies have found supermarket and organic selling units established with an aim of selling organic foods to high income segments (Hough & Contarini, 2023). This problem emerged originally when the researcher had a discussion with a few organic sellers met randomly in the market, and the importance lies in the fact that this research falls on vendors' perspectives while many past studies focussed on consumer perspective. The literature outlines that due to the higher prices, organic foods are generally purchased by high income earners (Jakubowska et al., 2024; De Oliveira Ferreira & Da Silveira, 2022). However, it has resulted conversely on achieving the aim of the SDG 12, the Responsible Production and Consumption and the SDG 3, Good Health and Well-being as the production is distributed to a limited segment. Some points out that price is a barrier in organic food market (Khanal,2020), but some studies point out that price has no effect and customers are willing to have a premium price (De Morais Watanabe et al., 2023), thus indicating that the inconsistencies of findings create an empirical gap. Further, the limited availability creates higher prices, which is doubled by the quality maintained by organic foods; thus, it aligns with the Demand theory in economics. In some cases, studies exhibit that customers have no trust on

certifications on items sold in supermarkets (Pandey et al., 2025). However, it is hard to find studies related to small-scale organic sellers in streets or rural vendors who sell high-quality organic products by keeping customers' trust as a certification; thus, there is a knowledge gap in the recent findings in the literature.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate issues of organic producers and retailers, like prices, certification, and consumer attitudes, and determine their perceived opportunities to appeal beyond high-income consumers. With the analysis of these issues in the context of what producers and sellers themselves can provide, the research aims to gain a clearer insight into how existing obstacles can be surpassed and the organic market can be promoted so that organic foods can be marketed more widely. Thus, the following research questions were formulated.

Research Questions:

1. What sustainable farming, production, and distribution strategies are adopted by local organic producers to ensure product quality and reduce overall costs?
2. How do small-scale organic food producers in Colombo overcome the challenges of high certification and production costs to ensure affordability and accessibility for middle- and low-income consumers?
3. In what ways do uncertified organic producers build and maintain consumer trust, and how does the absence of formal certification affect their market credibility and customer relationships?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the organic food market in Sri Lanka is still in its early stages, it is slowly developing. Most activities take place in the densely populated areas, as there is an increasing concern for one's health and the environment (Jayawardena & Wijesundara, 2022). Most of the market is targeted towards upper classes, as organic foods are still pricey and are available only at specific shops, organized farmers' markets, and in Urban centres (Malkanthi, 2020). Enthusiasm for organic food is increasing, yet the market is still in its

early stages. This is attributable to expensive certification, insufficient infrastructure, high cost of distribution and lack of standardization, which confine the area of the rural and lower-economy parts of the country (Babajani et al., 2023; Rathnachandra, 2023). This is made worse by many smallholder farmers not having the adequate technical and financial capacity and therefore, being unable to provide certified organic products, leading to limited organic offerings (Tennhardt et al., 2024). These factors combined lead to organic offerings being priced high, making them inaccessible to many consumers.

However, the Organic food Market is still growing and has been surrounded by dominant characteristics such as high income, Premium prices, well-educated professionals, and certifications etc. (Gundala & Singh, 2021; Chaudhary, 2024). Thus, the dominion, such as catering to higher income groups and higher prices, has become a major impediment for spreading it among middle- and lower-income groups who are willing to purchase but do not make clear actual realizations (Hough & Contarini, 2023). Though it has evaluated the factors behind the purchasing of organic foods, it has not paid attention to the disparities of purchasing organic foods among different income groups (Zheng et al., 2023). As pointed out by the vendors and producers, high certification cost and the limited availability make a higher demand, which aligns with the law of demand outlined in Demand Theory proposed by Marshall (1890), resulting in higher prices limiting the actual purchase of moderate- and low-income earners. Thus, this literature review outlines the comprehensive situation that prevails in the organic market and the necessity of investigating to cater to the new segments in the organic market.

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research applies a thematic analysis methodology to explore the opportunities and challenges of organic food producers and vendors in the local market. It seeks to set up the vendors' business practices and lived experiences. There were 20 organic manufacturers and sellers from among 4823 sole proprietorships and partnerships registered in the years between 2021 and 2024 in the Colombo

district as accessed via Sri Lankan Department of Business Registration in Battaramulla. 12 out of the total respondents were purposively selected to be interviewed in depth on saturation of data. The interviews were semi-structured to allow detailed, in-depth information on the business operations, customers, issues, and attitude towards organic certification among vendors to be drawn out. The vendors were requested to give a remark on their experience in organic food price and buying, the problem they face in the market, and their attitude towards organic certification and their overall experience of the consumer buying process of organic food including hindrances and opportunities like new market segments. Thematic analysis (Barun and Clarke, 2006) was used in data analysis, with a goal to understanding the individual stories of vendors and how they view their experiences in producing and selling organic food. Its objective was to identify the existing trends and results from the vendors' own statements, trying to construct a more detailed image of the realities and complexities of Sri Lanka's domestic organic food market. Ethics Review Committee of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura issued the ethical approval for this research and the Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which the researcher was authorized to record, and were later transcribed for accuracy. Research rigor and validity of the analysis were addressed through member checking, peer debriefing, and the audit trail for credibility and dependability. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling. A detailed description and participant verbatim excerpts were used to enhance the transparency and the trustworthiness of the research.

Even though the vendors dealt in different products, like fruits, vegetables, wine, and rice, it was analyzed in the same way because this thematic analysis does not deal with the products but with the experiences and practices individuals take within the organic and local markets. All vendors face similar socio-economic and environmental conditions, addressing the same issues concerning the production, certification, and market accessibility and trust of the consumers. Their stories revolve around the same

authenticity, sustainability, and livelihood strategy frameworks, as well as the pressure of the markets, which go beyond the differences of the products they offer. Therefore, while the diversity of products may be used as evidence, it will be within the context of the analytical focus so that vendors can be seen as a community which meaningfully participates in the economy of local organic food market.

3.1 Analysis

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from the producers and sellers of organic foods was carried out in several stages to enable identification of key themes, analysis, and interpretation of the data. The analysis followed a systematic approach where there was familiarization with the data, generation of codes, identification of themes, checking of themes, and finally interpretation of the findings in relation to research questions. After reading the 12 organic food producers and vendors' interviews, some of the general themes and issues arose. These included the price of organic products, consumer trust as an alternative to certification, challenges of organic certification, and some of the ways vendors cut costs in order to make their products within reach of low- and middle-income consumers.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondent details

Respondent # 1 – Organic Vegetable Producer

"I am 34 years old and cultivate vegetables organically at Thimbirigasyaya, Colombo. Because I personally do everything one-handed without involving middlemen, I can sell at the minimum possible cost. My biggest part of customers is not capable to afford to pay the higher cost of organic vegetables, and therefore I always ensure I cultivate on smaller parts of land and crop-switch. So, I can absorb the cost of production. I sell seasonal only so I can keep it affordable but provide fresh, new, quality organic products to the families within this area. Though not certified organic due to being expensive, I have had a good relationship of mutual relationship

with consumers. I inform them that I cultivate using ecologically sustainable, chemical-free practices. My strong belief is that organic food need not ever be an upper-income luxurious item, especially by the middle- and lower-income families. In order to be even more downwardly priced, I sell direct from the field without middlemen so that products will be fresh with lower cost."

Respondent # 2 – Organic Mushroom Producer

I am 41 years old, and I am a small-scale cultivator. I cultivate organic mushrooms in Piliyandala. Since there is not much space taken up by mushrooms, I've been able to have a small farm at home. Organic certification is extremely costly, so I don't have it, but I've won over the minds of my customers gradually. I grow the mushrooms organically with minimal inputs, and this allows me to sell them at prices lower than most certified organic mushrooms. Middle-class families form the majority of my customers, and I try to make the prices reasonable by selling directly to them. Instead of highlighting certification, I try to offer a consistent product that customers can rely on. The aim is to offer healthy, organic meals to households that otherwise would not have access to such food.

Respondent # 3 – Organic Tomato Sauce Producer

I am 39 years old and run an organic tomato sauce business based in Battaramulla, Colombo. Although organic tomatoes are more expensive to grow, I've found ways to reduce costs by sourcing them from local farmers who don't use chemicals. The expense of organic certification is something I've chosen to forgo because it adds unnecessary costs. Rather, I focus on building customer trust by keeping the quality of my sauce consistent. I produce the sauce in bulk, which reduces production costs, and I reduce packaging costs. These allow me to price the sauce in a way that makes it affordable to middle-income families while keeping everything organic.

Respondent # 4 – Organic Jackfruit products Producer

I am 30, and I purchase organic jackfruit from homes where there are jack trees, Padukka. There is simply too much jackfruit, and it's too delicious for people to do something expensive and obtain a certification. I sell value-added organic products to markets that are nearby and sell it there which makes them at a reasonable price. I'm preserving myself by raising the jackfruit on my own farm and maintaining sustainable agriculture the cost which does cause prices to increase. The majority of my clients are poor families, and I strive to keep prices as low as possible by keeping it a local distribution and removing middlemen. I believe organic food to be affordable to all individuals regardless of their income, so that is the reason I make an effort to put my jackfruit within everybody's reach. However, since I have the dream of serving the high-income segment, I still want to pursue the certifications in the future.

Respondent# 5 – Organic Jaggery Producer

"I am 48 years old and produce organic jaggery in Piliyandala, Colombo. Jaggery is food for the majority of Sri Lankans, but organic jaggery is very costly, especially when the cost of certification is taken into account. I do not put effort into acquiring certification because, in my view, it is not essential for a natural product like jaggery. Instead, I purchase raw material from rural traders and produce the jaggery organically. Since I sell it directly to consumers, I can make it cost-effective. In addition, I give special discounts on bulk orders, which facilitates families and retail outlets to order in bulk at a cheaper rate. My goal is to reach organic jaggery to everyone, especially family individuals who were not able to procure a more expensive organic product."

Respondent # 6 – Organic Vegetable Vendor

I am 30 years old and own a small vegetable stall that sells organic vegetables in Kesbewa. Though expensive, organic vegetables are made available to them by offering discounts for bulk orders and

bartering seasonal produce. My customers are mostly working-class families who cannot easily afford more costly vegetables, and as such, I offer my vegetables at low prices. I am not certified organic, but I've gained a good image among my consumers who think that I deal in fresh and organic vegetables. I aim to deliver healthy organic food to deserving persons, particularly middle- and low-class families.

Respondent # 7 – Organic Banana Vendor

I am 36 years old and I have an organic fruit shop in Dehiwala, Colombo. We keep the organic fruits different from the usual fruits. By doing it that way, people will have some degree of choice with varieties. Organic bananas is pricey, but I make my cost reasonable by providing information to my consumers about consuming organic. I am not a certified one, but I purchase the homegrown bananas directly from community gardens, and that is most significant to my consumers. I strive to provide them at as low prices as possible by selling them in small quantities at affordable prices. That way, even low-income consumers can afford organic Bananas without considering it's out of their league. I believe that everyone should be able to obtain healthy, organic food.

Respondent # 8 – Organic Peanut Butter Producer

I am 45 years old and sell homemade organic peanut butter in Bokundara, Colombo. While organic peanuts and ingredients are more expensive, I've managed to reduce production costs by preparing the peanut butter in smaller, carefully controlled batches. I prioritize certification because I believe that the quality of the product speaks volumes. I often give out samples so customers can really taste the difference. By sourcing local peanuts and minimizing marketing expenses, I've been able to price my peanut butter in a way that makes it accessible to families who usually can't afford certified organic products. My goal is to ensure everyone has access to healthy, organic food without it being a luxury.

Respondent # 9 – Organic wine producer (using king coconut)

I am 33 years old and I am involved in selling organic wine in kaduwela. My wine is organic, but I don't possess a certification because if I were to become certified, it would become too costly for my consumers, even though I would prefer to have an organic certification in the future. Instead, I sell it directly to them, and in this way, I can maintain it at inexpensive levels. I supply small volumes at affordable rates as opposed to other supermarket organic wines so that middle-class families may also get the health advantage of organic wine. I also believe that because I am gaining the confidence of my consumers, it's the certification I have. My objective is to provide them with new, organic items within their price. But as I am operating in the global market, I hope to get proper registrations in the near future

Respondent # 10 – Organic Cereals Seller (Organic Rice/Organic Cereals)

I am 32 years old and sell certified organic rice and other organic cereals (maintain an Ayurvedic products shop) in Bandaragama, Colombo. While certified organic products usually come with a higher price tag, I've managed to keep them affordable for middle-income earners by sourcing directly from certified organic farmers and reducing unnecessary costs like packaging and large-scale marketing. Certification has definitely helped boost customer trust, as people feel more confident knowing the products meet

Respondent #11 – Organic Fruit Seller

I am 42 years old and grow organic vegetables in Kaduwela, Colombo. I can keep vegetable prices low without the expense of certification. I attempt to have practices such as crop rotation and biological pest control in order to keep the cost of production low. By maintaining middlemen-free and selling directly to consumers in local markets, I keep prices low. I understand organic options are expensive and most working people cannot afford to pay for them, so I try

to take organic vegetables to them without excessive expenditure.

Respondent # 12 – Organic fruits and vegetables seller

I am 38 years old and grow organic mushrooms at Homagama, Colombo. Though it is more expensive for organic mushrooms, I have enhanced the scale of production so that I can make it more affordable. I am not interested in certification because I feel that it imposes additional cost on the commodity. Instead, I distribute directly to local markets so that I can offer a reduced price to families who want to eat organic food but lack the means to buy high-end prices. By streamlining my production and eliminating distributors, I can keep costs lower while keeping the product integrity intact.

4.2 Generation of Initial Codes

The following initial codes were developed from the interviews:

- Lack of certification because it is too costly
- Certification used to previously create trust
- Selling directly at cheaper price
- Use of local, natural, chemical-free processes
- Discount when bought in bulk
- Selling quantities at cheaper price
- In-season products utilized
- Low- and middle-income customers targeted
- Production in backyard or at community level
- Focus on quality over marketing
- Trust built through use of samples or long-term relations
- Strategic plans for the future on certification

4.3 Finding Themes

After codes clustering, the following dominant themes were identified:

Theme 1: Consumer Trust and Organic Certification

Theme 2: Affordability and accessibility of Organic Products for middle and low-income groups.

Theme 3: Cost-Reduction Strategy and Low-Cost Production

Theme 4: Accessibility of organic products for middle- and low-income groups

4.4 Thematic Reviewing

Themes were reviewed and combined to produce the following:

Theme 1: Consumer Trust and Organic Certification

- Sub-theme: Trust as an Alternative to Certification
- Sub-theme: Certification Costs and Barriers

Theme 2: Affordability and Accessibility of Organic Products to Middle- and Low-Income Consumers of Organic Products

- Sub-theme: Low-Income Consumers' Price
- Sub-theme: Balancing Quality and Price
- Sub-theme: Organic Food Availability for Middle and Low-Income Families
- Sub-theme: Strategies for making organic foods affordable

Theme 3: Cost Reduction Strategies and Low-Cost Production

- Sub-theme: Direct Selling to Cut Costs
- Sub-theme: Bulk and Seasonal Production to Sustain Low Prices

4.5 Identifying and Labeling Themes

All the themes that were revealed were operationally defined to achieve analytical distinctiveness and conceptual equivalence in qualitative research. Thematic explication involved systematic reading of

the interview transcripts, where prevalent patterns and stand-out nuggets of information were coded against specific thematic subheadings (Lawless & Chen, 2018). For purposes of presenting precise quotes of the participants to add authenticity and credibility to the findings, verbatim quotes of the participants were utilized in the narrative (Eldh, Arestedt, & Bertero, 2020). These are direct quotations based on empirical evidence, which affect the thematic interpretations and link the analysis with the participants' everyday experiences (Lindberg et al., 2024). Definitions and descriptions of all the participants for each of the themes outlined below were constructed systematically from a blend of theoretical models and

contextual subtleties emerging from the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Theme 1: Consumer Trust and Organic Certification

Some of the respondents prioritized consumer trust over official organic certification since certification was not affordable. Trust is established on the premise of openness, consistency of quality products, and community-based relations, thus reducing the need for formal certifications.

Table1: Supporting Quotes

Code	Location	Product	Certification Status	Key Insight
R1-OVP-THI	Thimbirigasyaya	Organic Vegetables	Not Certified (Too Costly)	Built strong trust with consumers despite a lack of certification.
R2-OMP-MOR	Moratuwa	Organic Mushrooms	Not Certified	Offers lower prices than certified mushrooms by growing organically without formal certification.
R5-OJP-PIL	Piliyandala	Organic Jaggery Producer	Not certified due to the certification cost	I do not put effort into acquiring certification because, in my view it is not essential for a natural product like jaggery
R7-OMV-DEH	Dehiwala	Organic Bananas	Not Certified	Relies on community-grown bananas, which consumers value more than formal certification.

Source: Compiled by the Author

Theme 2: Affordability and accessibility for Organic food products.

Organic food sellers attempt to make the organic food affordable to middle and low-income consumers by charging fair prices, providing small packs, and using effective marketing strategies and product methods. Further, the overarching goal of many small-scale

vendors is to make organic food accessible to all, particularly low- and middle-income families, other than the high-income groups. Strategies include affordable pricing, trust-building, and tailored sales methods.

Table 2: Supporting Quotes:

Code	Location	Product	Certification Status	Key Insight
R6-OVP-COL3	Colombo 3	Organic Vegetables	Not Certified	Uses seasonal products and bulk discounts to keep prices affordable.
R9-OWP-KAD	Kaduwela	Organic Wine (King Coconut)	Not Certified (Plans to Certify)	Offers low-priced small packs to make organic wine affordable to middle-income families.
R10-OCV-MAH	Bandaragama	Organic Cereals (incl. Jaggery)	Certified	Keeps prices moderate by selling directly to consumers, reducing additional costs.
R4-OJP-PAD	Padukka	Organic Jackfruit Products	Not Certified (Plans to Certify)	Believes organic food should be accessible to all; ensures affordability for everyone.
R8-OPBP-BOK	Bokundara	Organic Peanut Producer	Not Certified yet	By sourcing local peanuts and minimizing marketing expenses, I've been able to price my peanut butter in a way that makes it accessible to families who usually can't afford certified organic products
R11-OFV-KAD	Kaduwela	Organic Fruits & Vegetables	Not Certified	Prioritizes accessibility for middle- and low-income families struggling with high organic food prices.
R12-OVFFV-HOM	Homagama	Organic Vegetables & Fruits	Not Certified	Provides affordable organic options for families who can't afford premium-priced products.

Source: Compiled by the Author

Theme 3: Cost-Reduction Strategies and Low-Cost Production

Definition:

To offset the high costs of organic farming, respondents employ cost-reducing practices like producing in bulk, selling directly to consumers, and focusing on local, seasonal goods.

Table3: Supporting Quotes: Source: Compiled by the Author

Code	Location	Product	Certification Status	Key Insight
R6-OVP-COL3	Colombo 3	Organic Vegetables	Not Certified	Uses seasonal products and bulk discounts to keep prices affordable.
R3-OTP-BAT	Battaramulla	Organic Tomato Sauce Producer	Not Certified (Wishes to get the certification)	Reduces costs by sourcing them from local farmers who don't use chemicals and reduces the packaging costs.
R9-OWP-KAD	Kaduwela	Organic Wine (King Coconut)	Not Certified (Plans to Certify)	Offers low-priced small packs to make organic wine accessible to middle-income families.
R10-OCV-MAH	Maharagama	Organic Cereals	Certified	Keeps prices moderate by selling directly to consumers, reducing additional costs.

5. DISCUSSION

The theme content analysis of twelve interviews of organic sellers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, gives rich information on small-scale organic food production and business firms in a developing city context.

- **Trust and Certifications**

The majority of the suppliers cited financial and logistical challenges of certification and hence named customer relationships directly as a source of credibility. The approach is in line with studies by Malkanthi (2020) that established there exists a considerable consumer trust gap and Sri Lankan organic market growth challenge posed by poor organic certification schemes. (Wijesinghe & Aththanayaka, 2021). Also, among the sellers, there were a few who had plans for the future of being certified with the intention of selling to upper-end or international markets, indicating that although there is sufficient local trust, certification may be an instrument in reaching additional international markets.

However, the use of consumer trust as a proxy for formal organic certification by the vendors is particularly bringing important insights for the study since earlier studies have focused on the formal certifications are critical for sustaining the organic foods market. The current study empirically exemplifies customer trust as a powerful driver than formal certifications in the organic foods market, thereby strengthening the concept of community-based trust models in uncertified markets with an aim

Product strategies

Besides reducing operational expense, it also ensures purity and freshness of products. This use of standard or homestead-type production systems, like backyard farming and community gardens, also means cost savings. Such practices are an effective solution to small-scale organic farming economies. Thus, vendors are involved in the production of competitively priced products, also compromising on quality. Thus, Vendor

of sustaining the organic food market with a focus to maintain the product quality.

- **Pricing Strategies**

This also demonstrated that middle- and low-income consumers can make organics affordable to them by embracing strategies such as selling in packages smaller than standard packages, marketing in-season products, especially fruits and vegetables, and giving discounts on bulk sales. All these measures reduced the organic food perception of it as an indulgence. In line with our study, Malkanthi (2020) also observed that organic food has one of the largest obstacles to marketing among the urban Sri Lankans due to its cost, and therefore, the traders are cutting out the middlemen and addressing consumers' issues directly. This emphasis on price is central in facilitating equitable access to healthy food options, which is consistent with broader public health objectives. Through price reduction, suppliers assist in demolishing economic barriers most likely to attract moderate-income earners' consumption of organic products. Besides that, other cost-saving tendencies like selling products directly to consumers, using locally accessible raw materials, producing in large quantities, and minimizing the prices of marketing and packaging have been embraced by the affordability of prices as a priority. These outlets are fostering the popularity of organic food products among even more people. This study will also be adding to human-centred design literature on fair and sustainable food systems in Sri Lankan cities.

Networking and product variety form a planned product strategy.

Social Equity in Organic Consumption

Through the use of variable pricing, categorizing the organic market into niche markets, offering smaller pack sizes, and trust sales, vendors are indeed making efforts to democratize access to healthy food products. This bottom-up framework transcends principal barriers reported by Malkanthi (2020), where she

found that cost and unavailability are principle limiting determinants of organic food consumption among urban Sri Lankans (Jayawardena & Wijesundara, 2022). By bypassing structural hindrances such as certification and mass distribution, these stores are an example of a community-based approach to food justice, striving to bring organic production within reach of consumers with different levels of income. In sum, the strategies of these organic retailers in Colombo reflect a keen understanding of market forces and a resolve to overcome structural barriers to provide affordable, dependable organic food options to a broad cross-section of consumers.

6. CONCLUSION

Finally, thematic interview analysis of twelve organic shops in Colombo district, Sri Lanka, has a few important observations regarding organizational dynamics of small-scale organic food production and retailing in an urban emerging economy. Empirical evidence explains how retailers innovate in addressing issues on certification price, cost, and access to market. Based on customer trust, value for money, and social equity in organic consumption, the study contributes to achieving the SDG 12, the responsible production and consumption, and the SDG 3, Good health and Well Being by providing high-quality organic foods in affordable prices, ensuring the social equity in organic consumption.

Managerial Implications

Implications from this current thematic analysis have important managerial implications for small-scale organic food retailers and other stakeholders in similar urban settings. Vendors need to encourage consumer trust building by being open and honest in operations, with regular product quality, which can serve as a proxy for expensive organic certification. Strategic pricing instruments such as offering lower quantities, volume discounts, or selling fruits and vegetables in season can prove highly effective for placing the organic products within the reach of low- and middle-income consumers. Low costs through consumer

direct selling, utilization of locally available raw materials, minimizing costs on packaging and advertising must be considered to reduce prices without losing product quality in any way. Though certification is not feasible for all, certification can open up larger markets, particularly in the premium or export segments. Moreover, embracing social responsibility through providing organic food to all income groups can build brand reputation and loyalty, which can fuel long-term success. Overall, these remarks emphasize flexibility, customer-centric strategies, and long-term orientation in successfully executing the organic food market Managerial Implications. Further, with an aim of reaching the SDG goals, policymakers need to sustain the organic food market by launching community trust programs or cluster certifications, thereby eliminating the existing or potential drawbacks in the organic food market.

Theoretical contributions

This study builds upon several theoretical frameworks by investigating how small organic food retailers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, attain consumer trust and market penetration in the absence of any formal certification. Their direct, personal links are consistent with Relational Exchange Theory, which emphasizes the value of interpersonal relationships for trust building in business (Dwyer et al., 1987). This study adds that trust is a more important factor than the formal certification and documentation in a developing country such as Sri Lanka. Their proactive engagement in communal activities earns them credibility, in accordance with Social Capital Theory's focus on advantages gained through social networks and communal participation (Bourdieu, 1985).

Addressing Information Asymmetry Theory, producers provide open, first-hand information about their products, reducing consumer uncertainty (Akerlof, 1970). Their business ethics, such as fair prices and open promotion, address the ethical Consumerism framework that explains how ethical issues of consumers influence buying behaviour. By refuting Consumer Skepticism Theory (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998) through quality consistency

and transparency, sellers build credibility and trust. Drawing on these theories in combination, the research develops a composite explanation of the multi-dimensional steps such sellers take to achieve consumer trust, contributing and adding to existing theoretical explanations, as well as offering practical insight for similar socio-economic settings.

Future Directions and Recommendations

- Limitations and Research Opportunities

It was quite obvious that the study provides, consumers are discouraged from purchasing organic foods due to the lack of trust in organic certification provided by the bodies. Instead of that, these moderate-scale businesses are using consumer trust as a worthwhile factor to win the minds of consumers with an aim to long-term sustainability in the market. However, the cost incurred in the certification process is a burden from the vendors' standpoint. The study limits adhering to the standardization process by merely depending on trust. As trust is dependable, it is worthwhile to exceed the formal standardization to survive in the competitive market.

- Actionable Recommendations

The study recommends, from its findings to conduct pilot certification schemes through testing methods and identifying logical issues to ensure the product quality and processes. Furthermore, digital traceability systems for the verification of organic products would bring more transparency for consumers. Nevertheless, consumer education programmes that cover potential groups would sustain the organic food market

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