



Consumer Attitudes towards Organic Food Consumption: Focus Group Discussion in Colombo District, Sri Lanka

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4038/sljuduok.v8i3.112>

ABSTRACT

Gastronomic tourism is a rapidly growing segment in the hospitality industry with great potential. Amongst, organic foods gained a rapid attention from consumers due to its use of carbonic fertilizers and inherited special food qualities. But, contradictory ideas in the literature were explored regarding consumer behavior on organic and conventional food consumptions in Sri Lanka. Hence, the objective of the study aims to investigate the consumer attitudes and knowledge about organic foods during consumption. Given the qualitative nature of the issue, primary data were collected through focus group discussions. Through qualitative content analysis the findings revealed consumers are generally conscious about the use of chemicals and environmental impact of food production. As per, the consumers are knowledgeable and being patient for the extremely high prices of organic food materials due to its inaccessibility. Respectively, the implications mainly focus on enhancing government's involvement to stabilize organic supply chains in urban areas.

Keywords: *Consumer Attitudes, Consumer Knowledge, Focus Group, Organic Certification, Organic Foods*

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Hospitality refers to the provision of food, drink, and accommodation and it creates a link between the host and the guests. Within the hospitality industry, ‘food’, plays a vital role in satisfying the guests and it also results in the retention perceptions of the travellers. Restaurant operators use food to market their restaurants and destinations. Food has now become an essential requirement in the tourism and hospitality industry where consumers are more concerned in consuming healthy foods when dine-out for consumption. With that, the demand for organic foods has expanded rapidly due to the heightened awareness of the consumers regarding organic foods which they perceive to be healthy. Mostly, the consumers tend to consume organic materials due to the prevailing environmental problems, health concerns, food scares, and the problems due to genetically modified (GM) foods (Cachero-Martínez, 2020; Hwang et al., 2021, Kim & Kim, 2022). Promotion by mainstream retailers and main food producers as they transition towards organic product lines has also aided the growth of demand. According to The Business Research Company (TBRC) (2022), worldwide organic food market is expected to grow from \$227.19 billion in 2021 to \$259.06 billion in 2022 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.0%.

Sri Lanka, one of the producer countries, has a reputation for organic crop cultivation and exports a variety of organic products that meet international standards. Sri Lanka has been exporting a variety of organically certified products for over a decade. The country is regarded as the Asian region's pioneer in introducing organically certified tea and cinnamon to the global market. According to the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement (IFOAM), total land area under organic agriculture in Sri Lanka in 2014 was 19,517 hectares, accounting for 0.75% of total land area, a 27% increase from 15,379 hectares in 2006, accounting for 0.65% of total land area under agricultural production. With immediate action, in 2019, the Sri Lankan government put a nationwide ban on importing and using synthetic fertilizers and

pesticides and also ordered the farmers to go organic at their earliest possibility. But, the result was brutal and swift where the domestic rice production fell 20 percent in just the 6 months. The ban further gave devastating results to the nation's tea crop, its major export and also the foreign exchange. With that, the limited organic supply in the country further got restricted due to inaccessibility of organic raw materials and it became incapable to meet the demand of the consumers for organic food varieties (Senanayake, 2022).

Despite the situation, it is observed that Lankan consumers' attitude towards organic foods have different behaviors and their knowledge in organic foods are quite mixed up with locally and home produced food (Rodríguez-Bermúdez et al., 2020). And price premiums of organic foods have made organic dishes to be unpopular among some customer segments. As per, Wijesinghe and Nazreen (2020) also declared that consumer willingness to pay is a fluctuating phenomenon that is greatly influenced by consumer perceptions and attitudes. And, it is further explored that consumers who demand organic foods are tend to be health conscious and aware on foods' growth compared with the conventional alternatives in the restaurant industry of Sri Lanka (Jayawardena, Wijesundara & Pradeepamali, 2022). Yet, there is confusion among the consumer base regarding the organic certification; health aspects, (Perera & Johnson, 2018) and the product recognition and misleading advertising information. As a result, the demand for organic foods by the urbanized citizens in Colombo District, Sri Lanka remains questionable due to uncertainty of the organic foods' origin.

Further, Jayawardena et al (2022) have discovered that high price premiums, limited availability of organic raw materials and weaken organic supply chains as important factors limiting the organic demand. In order to understand the demand for organic foods within the Colombo District, Sri Lanka, it is essential to investigate the above mentioned issues clearly. Research questions of the study will elaborate, "Who are the organic consumers?" Why do people choose organic? Are they typical customers

or a small subset? How do customers feel about the price premiums that are typically necessary for organic foods? And how significant is organic certification in terms of consumer trust? The objective of the study will be to answer these addressed research questions. By adapting a focus group discussion, it enabled to identify the consumer attitudes and knowledge on organic food consumption.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Organic Foods

“Food produced by farmers who emphasize the use of renewable resources and the conservation of soil and water to enhance environmental quality for future generations” is known as organic foods (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). And, Kapuge (2016) elucidated that organic food contains no chemical fertilizers, pesticides, preservatives, or synthetic food enhancers and is grown solely with carbonic fertilizers. Knowing the fact, most of the developed countries such as the USA, Denmark, the UK and Germany practice dine out organically concept due to its sole healthiness and safety (Basha & Lal, 2019). Unlike developed countries, Sri Lanka still struggles in exploring the organic foods originality when consuming organic dishes due to organic raw materials’ inaccessibility in the country (Jayawardena et al., 2022).

2.2. Organic Farming

Previous studies of Wijesinghe and Nazreen (2020) stated organic farming as a form of crop and livestock production that does not use pesticides, fertilizers, GMOs, or growth hormones. Furthermore, it is usually seen as being more environmentally friendly than food tourism because it conserves the environment. Argumentatively, the findings of Sangakkara and Katupitiya (2000) declared that the risen demand for organic food quantity than food quality has resulted conventional farming to dominate the food industry in Sri Lanka. However, despite conventional agricultural methods, many nations across the world regulate and legally enforce organic agricultural

methods based on the standards set by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

2.3. Health

Generally, consumers perceive the value of organic products differently when compared with fast foods and/or conventional items. Utmost specialty in organic foods is considered to be its eco friendliness and healthiness when compared with fast food items (Selvarajah & Geretharan, 2017). But, busy lifestyles of consumers have opened the path to a rapid growth of fast food consumptions and growth of fast food outlets regional wise (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016). Yet, it is explored that consumers are well aware of the nutrition and the health impact of organic food varieties when compared with rest of the food types with no doubt. Therefore, Tobi et al (2019) claimed organic food is healthy and standardized and are specifically taste differently when compared with conventional alternatives.

2.4. Price Premiums

Since organic raw materials are not accessible at any time of the season, mostly the dishes are high priced. Due to its dramatic availability in the food industry, price premiums tend to evolve within organic food products as a direct effect of the health attribute (Rizzo et al., 2020). Thus, lack of consumer awareness of organic food prices and its availability has caused the organic dishes to be unpopular among nonorganic consumers in the hospitality industry. Proving the fact, the findings of Khanal (2020) revealed that lack of understanding of organic food products restraint the customers to buy organics in consumption. However, the superiority of organic foods is based on its relatively high price premiums which are simply cannot be competed with conventional food products.

2.5. Dining out Organically

In general, organic consumers are likely to dine out organically rather cooking at home, which they perceive dining out can also drive public interest in food nutrition, safety, and its authenticity (Poulston & Yiu, 2011). Most of the developed countries have already been adapted to the dining out organically concept and now it has grown for catering organic consumption as well (Basha & Lal, 2019). As per, it can be derived that developing countries are still in their initial stage of exposing organic dine in in their food outlets which is still not attentive among the customers due to their lack of awareness and understandability.

3. METHODOLOGY

A focus group is a carefully structured discussion aiming to elicit participants' perspectives on a certain topic in a non-threatening environment. It is normally made up of seven to ten participants who were chosen on purpose because they have particular traits related to the topic of the focus group study. Consequently, it drives the participants to expose themselves with different viewpoints on a particular subject (Annisette & Cooper, 2017). And, focus group discussions are used as a tool for qualitative research designs specifically in social science and marketing research (Mishra, 2016).

In this study, focus group discussions were conducted in Colombo District, Sri Lanka, to gather the most relevant data to attain the study's objective. Colombo was chosen as the research area hence, it is identified to be the most urbanized district in Sri Lanka (Yuan et al., 2019) and further, Patabandige and Yapa (2016) ascertained that consumers in urbanized areas are fond of consuming fast foods than organic foods due to their busy life schedules and lifestyles.

There were altogether 32 participants in four groups containing 8 participants in each. One group consisted of organic consumers, group two and three consisted of nonorganic consumers and group four consisted of home gardeners. Due to limited

availability of organic foods in Colombo District, it was of interest to explore the extent to which home grown foods are meeting the demand for organic foods.

The purpose of the focus group study is to discover how urban consumers feel about food consumption in general, organic foods in particular, and how much they know about organic foods. Due to rising curiosity about the factors that influence food choices, whether conventional or organic, it was asked from both organic and conventional buyers about their knowledge of organic certification, what organic items they purchased and why and how they viewed the price premium for organic foods in order to detect variations in their views and motives.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The socio-demographic information of the focus group participants is shown in the Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Information of the Focus Group Participants

Marital Status	Single	14
	Married	12
	Divorced	2
	Others	4
Highest Degree Obtained	PhD	6
	Masters	6
	Bachelor	10
	Diploma	7
Employed	Yes	28
	No	4
Occupation	University lecturers	10
	Researchers	2
	Undergraduates	3
	Software Engineers	10
Nationality	Others (unemployed and other)	7
	Sri Lankan	32
Age of participant	20-29	6
	30-39	9
	40-49	10
	50-59	3
	60+	4
Gender of participant	Female	23
	Male	9
Children under 18 living in household	Yes	20
	No	12

Annual household income	<30,000	5
	30,000 – 59,999	7
	60,000 – 89,999	10
	90,000+	10
Have you ever bought organic food?	Yes	25
	No	4
	Don't Know	3
When was the first time?	Less than 1 year	
	More than 1 year ago	10
	More than 5 years ago	7
	No answer/forgotten	4
How often do you purchase organic?	Weekly/Bi-weekly	11
	Monthly	7
	Few times a year	3
	Never	10
From where do you buy organic?	No answer	6
		6
	Supermarkets/ Food co-ops/ Home grown	
	Most of them had multiple answers	

Question 01: When purchasing foods, what are the most important characteristics you pay attention to?

The responses to this question differed according to the participants' socio-demographics, such as whether a family member had a health problem or food allergy, whether the family had kids, whether they were vegetarians, and whether they were budget bound. People are primarily concerned with the food characteristics such as: sensory appeal, freshness, variety, nutrition, cost, convenience, and portion size, where the food comes from, and how the food is made (Table 2).

Table 2: Characteristics valued by participants when buying foods

Taste Freshness
Appearance (colour, look)
Health
Nutrition
A balanced diet with high nutritional value for kids
Low fat, low salt, low sugar, GMO-free
Convenience/portion served/food varieties
Price
Value for the money spend
Produced locally/ Home grown
Seasonality
Family and kids' choice of selection
Grown with minimum chemicals Environment friendliness

Does not contain GMOs

“Probably fresh veggies and a well-balanced diet; I'm constantly mindful about balancing vitamins, minerals, and proteins." Cost is an issue. When you have children, what others in the home like to eat, as well as people's tastes, comes into account”.

Families with health issues such as diabetes or food allergies/sensitivities wanted to know what was in their food and frequently reviewed nutrition labels especially relate to low fat, low sugar, low salt, and etc.

“The first thing that comes to my mind is freshness. I also keep an eye on the sugar content because my husband and parents have diabetic, as well as the salt and fat amount in meals, so I keep an eye on that sort of thing. But, when it comes to vegetables, meats, and fruits, freshness is everything for me. I don't concern if anything is or isn't packaged”.

Some participants expressed a preference for organic or unprocessed foods. Others chose foods that were seasonal, locally sourced, or home grown. Many individuals cultivated their own vegetables because they taste better and contain fewer pesticides. And with the prevailing situation of the country, some participants were motivated to cultivate their own food at home gardens due to high inflation and low income compared to rate of expense. Among them, there were some participants who were afraid to use the term ‘organic’ to describe their home gardens because they were unsure about the manure, they used to produce food.

“One thing I might like to add is that I eat what's in season as well, and I cultivate a lot of delicious stuff in my garden. When it's in season, it's also fresh, and I prefer to know the history of the food, whether it's local or synthesized”.

For those who identified themselves as organic consumers prefer personal health, awareness of food origins, environmental concerns and lack of food enhancements in foods before they purchase foods.

“I enjoy looking at the food, smelling it, and tasting it. I prefer to be informed about the food I order, so I ask questions about where it came from and other details. Further, I'm concerned about the environment from which the food is sourced, so I'm quite selective in that regard. I don't worry about the expense because I believe the benefits and health exceed it in the long run; with my age my health is more important in the long run than the short-term economic gain”.

The key consideration for non-organic customers' food selections appears to be sensory appeal, particularly taste and flavor. Because the majority of organic consumers in this survey were health conscious and nutrition was an essential factor. It was evident that some participants had strong feelings about the food they ate, whereas others were less fussy.

“We're health concerned, so I try to buy as little processed food as possible. We don't mind making meals from scratch using whole grains and fresh vegetables. When it comes to vegetables and fruits, freshness is often more important than price. I dislike overly packaged items with superfluous hype on the package, which raises the price twice as much as it would”.

The discussions also revealed that people frequently had competing goals when it came to food. Most organic customers intended to buy as much organic food as possible, but were often limited by their money in hand, what was available in the market, or the time required to shop around. For families with kids, the choice is often influenced by what the children will eat rather than the nutritious content of the food or the adult shoppers' tastes and preferences. Another potential problem is that city people wish to live a healthy lifestyle but are frequently either too lazy or too busy to do it.

“I have an idealistic view of what the most important aspects of food are for me. I mean, I'd love to eat healthy and low fat content, but with all the daily activities I do it is hard to eat healthy and in those times I prefer easy access to food rather seeking for healthiness”.

Some participants also believed that making a few healthy organic choices would not compensate for their other bad habits such as eating fatty or junk food, drinking, or smoking and would have no effect on their health. Because of the price premiums associated with organic products, it was observed that for the undergraduates budget was the primary restraint on food choice.

Question 02: What do you mean by organic foods?

This question was asked to elicit participants' perceptions of 'organic', or what comes to mind when they hear the term 'organic'. Most participants stated organic to be free of chemicals, pesticides, and residues, healthy, and highly expensive and connected these with the physical characteristics of food products (Table 3).

Table 3: Participants View on Organics

No chemicals at all
No pesticides, no chemical fertilizers, no hard chemical sprays Low or as little pesticides and chemicals as possible
No artificial colours and flavours Free of GMOs
No food enhancements
Naturally ripened
Grown as close to a natural process as possible
Small scale production Highly seasonal vegetables and fruit
Home/ locally grown
Growing and producing produce in as old-fashioned a way as
Little wormy things/ pests
Not accessible all the time
Highly expensive and high cost
Natural and healthier Nutritious
Originally healthy foods
Can be marketed well in this area since now the food is far away from healthiness

“It's devoid of chemicals, pesticides, and residues for me. Mostly, it's healthy and fresh, but I'm not sure how fresh it is these days and, in this area, when I see so many

items that are pre-packaged and marketed with the trade mark organic, but I'm sure the organic certified organizations would monitor these products before exposing to the market and I trust them to keep up with the ethical standards of the food products they produce which are assumed by the term organic”.

However, some participants perceive organics to be nature loving, sustainable and environmentally friendly food products which are ethically grown without food synthetics in the production process. While, some perceived organics to be home grown fruits and vegetables with worms inside and free of GMOs that is strictly against the concept of organically grown.

“It is grown in accordance with nature; thus, it is sustainable. The natural and freshness of the food itself gives the feeling of ethics in foods. I guess I associate organic with health because I feel more comfortable consuming organic foods”.

“To me, organic implies cultivated or raised without the use of chemicals, pesticides, or other harmful substances. It also makes me think of homegrown, organic food”.

The argument built by the group of conventional participants exposed the lack of confidence they have in organic foods in Colombo District. They simply doubt the ability of the food to be produced without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.

“I know it is said that organic foods are free of pesticides. But I question the organic label that has been put to the organic food. How organic would the food product be? Does the organic term used in the food actually come from organic originality? And in which process the food becomes organic or inorganic? Is it a term used by the marketers to market their food dishes? There are number of questions wander in my mind when referring to the term organic”.

Question 03: What does certification of organic mean to you?

Participants were asked about organic certification to determine the importance of it in their perceptions, confidence, and attitudes about organic foods before and during consumption. Most participants agreed that organic certification entails labels, trademarks, and logos, which imply a stamped approval and some form of guidelines and standards, and that it is a significant instrument to increase faith and trustworthiness in the product's origin (Table 4).

Table 4: Participants View on Organic Certification

Some kind of standards or guidelines Trademarks or logos Producers follow some strict guidelines that are monitored by respected certifying authorities Testing organic farmers in a random basis which is not regular Strict production guidelines Standards or guidelines are focused on production process instead of the product
It may be a stamped approval Trustworthiness and faith Some proposed guidelines are being met by the farmers It is a kind of a reward to organic farmers who have done the right in producing smaller yields as a result The food is grown for its near possibility of without chemicals and pesticides Free from chemicals It gives me confidence to eat what I truly search for Certified has the least extra stuff in it
I doubt the certification of organics and truly how is it done in a regular basis of food delivery? Who checks these certifying parties? I am not convinced that it is subjected to its right policies How can we be sure about its checking process and how far has that process been processed? The organic standard is difficult to be processed in Colombo, but I think it would be workable to practice
I actually don't know what organic certification really means and its importance I can't remember and I hope I have never seen such a description in Colombo food outlets Well, I don't actually care about it at all

“To me, organic certification indicates that the food has satisfied the requirements for growing, storing, and meeting the requirements of various firms certifying it. I understand that there are several different organizations in Colombo or maybe in Sri Lanka that you can get certified for, and the requirements that they're growing, and

that they've also undergone regular testing to ensure that people aren't cheating the system by simply putting organic labels on inorganic food”.

“I think organic certification signifies that the producer is following some sort of criteria and is being supervised by whoever is providing the certification. I believe they also paid to have their soil tested periodically in order to gain certification, and if they're intense enough to do that, I believe I'll have greater respect for them and definitely be willing to consume their products”.

However, there was a significant uncertainty regarding organic farming and its certification. Some respondents question and argue on the amount of guarantee, the level of packaging, the distance traveled, the growth of huge corporate organic farms, the likelihood of contamination from neighboring conventional farms, and organic farming's ability to provide food security to a growing population.

“There is a disparity between what I comprehend when I walk to the store and say, "This is organic." I'm aware that there are always requirements that farmers must meet in order for their food to be labeled as organic or chemical-free. But I'm hoping it means something more, like developing in touch with, in harmony with, and mostly in sustainable communities which is very rare in Colombo. So, you know, I'm a little concerned about the industry side of organics, since all you have to do is meet the basic criteria to be authorized to label your produce as organic”.

According to one participant, organic certification is about the production method, instead of the product, therefore there was no guarantee to say that the products were not treated with chemicals once they leave the farm. There were also doubts regarding what was required to certify organic milk and meat. These responses given by the participants backed up prior research findings that consumers want more information when they consume food.

“It basically indicates they're manufacturing something that doesn't damage the environment or the end customer, but as a consumer, I'm not sure how this certification is obtained.” And, in fact, to be honest, I wouldn't mind finding it out”.

Question 04: What type of organic foods do you buy? Where? And, Why?

Fruit and vegetables appeared to be the most popular organic items purchased, followed by essentials such as bread, cereals, beans, milk, yoghurt, and juice. Fresh milk and fruits were highlighted several times as important organic purchases due to vegetarian diets or food allergies. Although a range of organic products were purchased, the list was still relatively limited as compared to conventional foods accessible in Colombo supermarkets or in small and medium food stores. Participants, in fact, tended to mention only a few things that were more easily or frequently available to them.

Organic foods were purchased from a diverse food store such as Kenko1st Organic foods shop and Live Life Organics, organic specialty stores, fruit and vegetable markets, and directly from local farmers or friends who knew places. Some participants grew their own vegetables as well. Basically, it's “wherever is available”. Most organic customers looked for organic food in various places, although others exclusively bought what was offered at Kenko1st Organic foods shop and Live Life Organics. Because organic customers in Colombo looked to have few options, what they ate was determined by what was available.

“It is really difficult to access for organic foods. If it is readily available in any case at here, Colombo, I would definitely go for it for sure”.

However, there were other factors as well to consider (Table 5). Organic staple goods (flour, cereals, grains, for example) were purchased since they made up a large amount of the food consumed and hence were thought to bring the highest benefits in terms of avoiding chemicals. Some participants purchased organic products due to

the number of sprays required if conventionally manufactured. Some examples include bananas, broccoli, onions, and fresh milk products.

Table 5: Reasons Behind Purchasing/ Not Purchasing Organic Foods

Reasons for buying	Reasons for not buying
Health concerns To fight against health problems To keep away artificial chemicals To avoid synthetic food enhancements in meats	Constraints in Availability Inconvenience If the food item is not available in the shop I usually visit, then it won't be on my list anymore I am lazy to go out searching for organic themed foods specially in this city I search for convenience more
Awareness and their specialty	High price premiums
Avoid allergic reactions to chemicals	Extra cost and extra effort in searching
Environmental friendliness and concerns	Prefer something that is grown locally and how it is grown
As I get older, I like it cleaner and healthier	It is not a realistic way to grow food and not convinced on the risk of inorganic foods

“When I buy beans and broccoli, I always try to buy organic beans and broccoli since it has a reputation for being cultivated with a lot of pesticides and sprayed with chemicals, so these are the items that I make an effort to buy organic”.

Further in the analysis, it was observed that some participants are more likely to buy organic vegetables such as carrot, lettuce, salad leaves and some fruits items such as mango, banana and papaya because they believe they taste better than the conventional items.

Most of the inorganic consumers tend to buy fresh fruits and vegetables because they felt they would be unprocessed and thus more likely to be truly organic and because conventional strawberries and tomatoes were perceived to be huge yet with no taste). Further, they prefer staples such as flour, rice, cereals, etc., oils as they know how it is produced), and eggs due to the consideration over animal welfare. Furthermore, chickens were also known to be of the use of growth hormones and due to these fact, they (inorganic consumers) would prefer to try organics if possible.

“I don’t usually tend to eat meat in a regular basis, but if I was ever going to buy anything organic, I would really prefer my meat products to be organic because of the high concentration of chemicals as they go down the food chain and personally, I know how much antibiotics the butchers use on chicken to grow for the production process”.

Comparing the responses given by organic customers for buying organic foods with the reasons given by non-organic consumers for considering purchase of particular organic items, it is obvious that they are virtually the same. That is, they are all concerned about the amount or concentration of chemicals used, artificial flavors used to enhance food taste, and the welfare of animals.

Most of the organic consumers expressed a great desire to purchase only organic products, but often felt unable to do so since they were just unavailable in Colombo. When they couldn't find them, they simply had to buy regular conventional meals. They believed organic food production needed to be practical and adaptable. This brings to light a significant concern for organic customers in city areas like Colombo. The availability and quality of organic foods are their major concerns. The amount of effort and time required to meet an organic consumer's everyday needs is clearly enormous in a busy city like Colombo. And, due to a scarcity of supply, organic and conventional items are frequently and often substituted.

“I don’t want to be running for like hundred miles in searching for organic foods. But in case if I am in a massive requirement to eat healthy organic products, I will visit to Kenko 1st to satisfy my cravings”.

Given the demand of people's time in today's modern society, it's easy to understand why most of the people believe organics are better in many ways. But, for organic consumers, they couldn’t afford to shop around seeking for organics for longer distances. It was identified that the lack of availability of organic materials looks to be the most significant constraint for a further market growth in Colombo. During the

discussions, it became evident that supply sources were becoming even more limited with the current economic crisis where a local produce market could possibly be vanished and closed. Despite that, non-organic consumers were clearly unaware of organic vegetable supply sources because they did not seek them out.

“The reason I don’t purchase organic veggies is because they’re so much more expensive and harder to bear at this point from which we are currently going through and I don’t think they’re worth it just as they are over marketed”.

“I really don’t question whether the food is organic or not. So, whenever the item I am search for is available, I go for it. So really, I don’t know whether I have ever bought organics or not”.

Question 05: Do you think there is a price difference between organic and non-organic food and is it justified?

The majority of participants agreed that there is a clear price difference between organic and non-organic food items, but they didn't know how much the difference would be. They showcased a few reasons for this price contrast between the aforesaid foot items and can be stated as lower yields, small scale production, extra costs connected with certification, requirement of a large workforce to grow the foods by keeping a keen eye on challenges in controlling pests and illnesses without chemicals, higher dangers, and scarcity. And apparently, majority of the participants agreed price difference as a fair fact because organic food costs more to grow.

Table 6: Reasons for Price Disparity Between Organic and Non-Organic Foods

Scarcity of raw materials
Cost of certification (production, process, authorities)
Daily observation in controlling pests and diseases without chemicals
Lower yields specially in Colombo
Small scale production
Required large workforce

Facing more wastage if not spraying chemicals
Organic grown chickens (poultry) need more space
Paying high cost to the producer to get it to the market
Extra packaging/wrapping

Table 7: Price Disparity Justification

Yes	No/ Not Sure
Personal benefits:	Fear of people is the prey
For what you get per benefits that you get	Over-priced/ Price premiums
It is healthier and more nutritious	Ripped-off by intermediaries
Better quality	Only a certain customers ($\geq$ middle class upper) could afford it
Environmental healthy	Not aware
Ethical	Don't think that the certification regulation is strictly in use
Tastes better	
Feeling good for contributing to sustainability and not contributing to soil erosions	
Organic growers should be recognized and rewarded for the hard work under many challenges	I don't think it is sustainable, I think it is a boutique and a marketable area in the industry
Reflection of real costs	It is not said or heard from anywhere that it is better for my health
It is nearer to the real cost of production	Profits oriented marketing technique
Mass production of food is a dream due to high cost and poor quality if done for low cost)	We would draw to starvation if we keep seeking for this stuff
It is low cost or cheap when compared to processed and packaged food	
It is cheap when compared to vitamin supplements taken	
Paying higher prices priory and encourage supply and eventually lowering prices	
But I don't think many people would be willing to pay double or triple to buy organics than convenient fast foods	
Only if we could prove that organic is healthier for 100% and better for the environment	
It should not be cost as much as it addressed in the market	

“I believe there is a significant pricing difference. Perhaps it is very phenomenal in rural communities. But it's probably more expensive than regular fast food, and I believe it's because of the certification and adhering to the strict regime of guidelines that are required to ensure that the products sold are of the highest quality, and having production costs a little bit higher to meet that standard”.

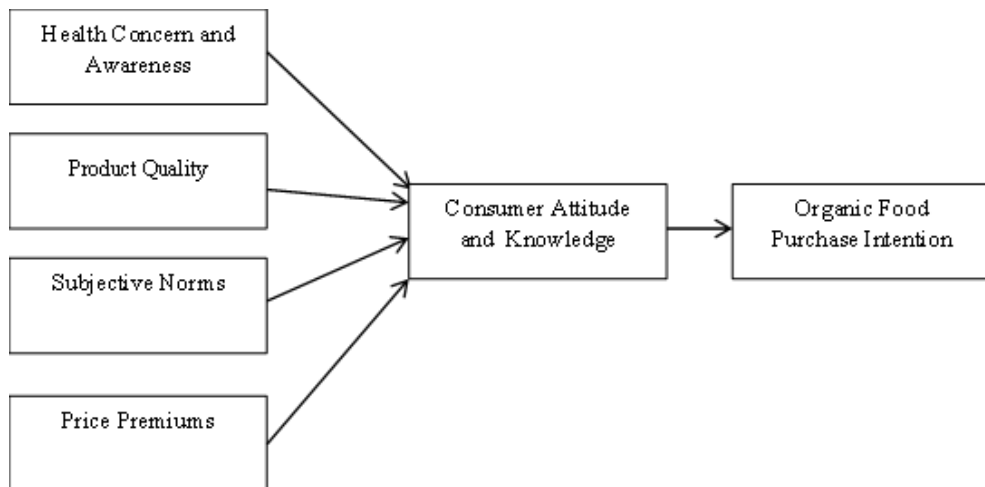
Other respondents thought price was justified because organic food was perceived to be healthier, more nutritious, and of different taste compared to conventional. Some defended it by claiming that organic food was more ethical or environmentally friendly and sustainable.

“I'm assuming there is, but I'm not sure how much. I've seen that free range eggs have a significant premium over synthetically raised hens, but I'm ready to pay that premium because I know, well, just ethically, I don't want any poisoned eggs (hens grown from antibiotics). I believe it is justified since I have friends who produce organic and I know they are not wealthy, so whatever premium they can obtain is justified for them. On the other hand, it is entirely up to me to determine whether or not I am willing to pay”.

“With a small-scale production with rarely accessible foods nowadays, I think it is fair to have price premiums for the organic foods as it is hard to meet the supply to the demand. But I don't think many people are willing to pay the price premiums for organics in the current context, but it is concerned by our generation to eat healthy. However, I think it is justified”.

Another viewpoint is that price premiums due to scarcity may be necessary in the short term to promote more production, but would eventually lead to reduced prices, making it more affordable to more people. Another interesting response was, “I'd like to see the government fund organic farmers, help them along, and make it more available to consumers”.

Figure 1: Factors affecting Consumer Attitude and Knowledge when purchasing Organic Foods



Source: Developed by the Researcher based on the Analysis, 2022

5. CONCLUSION

In order to fetch the accurate and practical data regarding the organic food consumption demand, a focus group study was undertaken to assess consumer attitudes and awareness about organic food in Colombo District, Sri Lanka. The study was undertaken through four focus groups and five structured questions. The overall findings of the study indicated that;

- Sensory appeal of the food as one of the most important factors in the food selection
- Levels of awareness and understanding of organic and organic certification was varied between participants
- The availability of organic food in Colombo district is a constraint for consumer demand
- Organic food buyers are motivated to buy organics due to the concerns about dietary and health restrictions

- Potential motivators for non-organic consumer to consider buying organics are the level of chemicals used in regular fast foods, and environmental friendliness
- Both the organic and non-organic consumers believe price premiums for organic foods are justified because of the high production costs, lack of supply of organic raw materials and ineffective supply chain for organics in Colombo district. Yet, it was analyzed these price disparities among organic and conventional items lead to fluctuate the purchasing behavior of the consumers

Significantly, it was explored that market for organic foods in Colombo District remains limited mainly due to lower yields and small-scale production to supply more to meet the demand.

The findings of Chen and Antonelli (2020); Migliore et al (2015) were consistent with the research findings where socio demographic factors are an influential factor for consumer preferences and food choices. Among them, income, gender, lifestyles and social beliefs and norms play a huge role within the consumers to go for organic consumption. When organic is identified as free from chemicals and antibiotics, many participants consider a familiarity with organic and organic certification. But organic certification is not familiar yet, it involves with the understanding of standards, guidelines and strict regime to be followed to meet the authentic originality of organic foods. Further, the availability of organic foods is a constraint found under the analysis where participants, both organic and inorganic desire to buy organic foods but the inaccessibility of the and the time acquired to hunt down for organic food items hold them back to carry on with their regular fast-food purchases. As such, the substitute conventional food products, it is a challenge for the organic consumers to purchase the organic foods since most of the producers blend both the food items together in order to attract customers.

In the aspect of price disparity, most of the participants thought the price difference between organic and conventionally produced foods was justifiable because organic farming requires more work and lower yields, and as a fact respondents felt it was also more sustainable and ethical. Organic products were regarded to be healthier, more nutritious, and tastier; therefore, price premiums were thought to be legitimated. As a result, many participants were willing to pay the higher prices for organic products. There were, however, some doubts concerned. Such as, the higher price may be extremely expensive for low-income individuals such as undergraduates.

During the focus group discussions, it revealed some discrepancies between organic and non-organic customers. The crucial factor is the set of criteria utilized for meal selection. In most cases, organic customers had a far longer list than their conventional counterparts. This has also been declared in the findings of Uddin and Gallardo (2021). According to Kapuge (2016), organic consumers tend to view their effect of food choices on the personal health and awareness factors while Patabandige and Yapa (2016) ascertained that conventional buyers are more considering the sensory appeal of the food related to the taste and appearance. And the findings of the study declared that there were some participants who wanted to try out organic foods just to check with whether they taste better. Moreover, it was explicit that availability of the food products is a major limitation to purchase organic products in Colombo District. And that declared, not only the price premiums hold the consumers back in consuming organic foods. As per, it is clear that price and negative attitudes of the non-organic consumers are the barriers to consume organics. Further, it can be stated that, these findings can further be validated using large random samples in future research areas.

Simultaneously, several policy implications could be inferred if these findings hold up in a larger sample than used in this study. First, given the overall lack of consumer awareness and understanding of the term of organic and organic certification, consumer education and information are required. According to the focus group

discussions, doubts about organic farming and certification, and thus negative sentiments toward organic goods, is frequently the result of a lack of understanding and knowledge.

If education and awareness programs are implemented with the involvement of the government, it would make a huge impact on the consumer concerns relate to the level of understanding, transport distance of foods from the production region, emergence of organic farming and food security to the growing population regarding organic foods and its production process. It is highly recommended for the government, being a key stakeholder, to participate actively in strengthening the distribution channels for organic foods in urbanized areas like Colombo District to build sustainability in Colombo gastronomic industry.

Moreover, the food choices of the consumers are influenced by different motives such as health and convenience. Some of the participants mentioned that they would love to eat healthy but with the busy life schedules they have a tendency to move with convenience as per the time being. Thus, these attitudes of the consumers need to be analyzed strictly by the marketers in order to get their message through their behavior and to find ways to resolve such conflicts faced by the city consumers.

However, the deterrents faced by both organic and non-organic consumers in buying organic food products need to be acknowledged by the industry stakeholders with the compulsory participation of the government through finding modes to strengthen the supply chains and distribution channels, establish awareness programs/ workshops to enhance knowledge of consumers on organic foods and related limitations, and regulation of policies around the urban areas of Sri Lanka. Succinctly, it is needed to carry out more research on demand and supply side issues of organic foods especially in urban areas of Sri Lanka in order to build the path for a sustainable gastronomic industry in Sri Lanka.

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