

An Empirical Analysis of the Effect of Trust on Purchase Intentions of Organic Foods

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Abstract. The issue of trust has been recognized as an important factor in the intention to purchase organic food. This study focuses on the role of different dimensions of trust in organic food purchase intention in China, aiming to explore whether there are differences in their effects and mechanisms. We conducted empirical tests using PLS-SEM with data from a survey of 400 Chinese consumers. The results show that different dimensions of trust have different magnitudes of influence on organic food purchase intentions. In addition, trust can influence purchase intention through attitudes and subjective norms. Meanwhile, perceived behavioral control was not a significant moderating variable.

Keywords: Trust, PBC, Attitude, Subjective norms, Organic food.

1. Introduction

China's organic food market grew tenfold from 2009 to 2018, reaching € 8.1 billion in 2018. However, per capita expenditure on organic food in China was only € 5.8 in 2018, less than half of the global average (Cao et al., 2022), therefore, some measures are needed to increase Chinese consumers' organic food consumption.

Many studies have reported that trust issues are the main factor influencing consumers' intention to purchase organic food (Chen, J., & Lobo, A. 2012), however, most previous studies explored the effect of a single trust issue on organic food purchase intention (Sonderskov, K. M. et al., 2011), and did not discuss the effect of different dimensions of trust on organic food purchase intention. Most of the research on organic food has focused on Europe and the United States, and is relatively rare in the Chinese market. More importantly, China, as an important producer of organic food, has failed to meet expectations in terms of organic food consumption.

Instead, this study aims to explore the comparison of the magnitude of the role of three different dimensions of trust, as well as the differences in the influence mechanisms between different trusts. Considering the great potential of organic food, it is necessary to investigate the effects of different dimensions of consumer trust on their organic food purchase intentions in the Chinese context. This study uses survey data from Chinese residents to explore the effects and mechanisms of trust. Purchase intention was investigated under the mediating variables of subjective norms and attitudes. In addition, we investigate how trust mediated by PBC affects new aspects of purchase intention.

This study makes three possible contributions to organic food purchase intentions. First, we extend the research on the differences in the impact of different trust dimension issues on organic food consumption. Most previous studies have either emphasized the role of a single trust issue in organic food purchase behavior or purchase intention (Hansen et al., 2018 ; Parashar et al., 2023). It enriches the research on organic food purchase intention in China. Second, this study further explored the specific mechanisms of subjective norms and attitudinal issues on purchase intention, aiming to make up for the shortcomings of existing studies that neglect the potential mechanisms between subjective norms and attitudes as mediating variables and purchase intention. Third, we investigated possible interactions on PBC and purchase intention.

2. literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Subjective norms, attitudes and PBC

Several studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between attitude and willingness to consistently purchase organic food. For example, Thi Nguyen and Dang (2022) showed that positive attitudes drive consumers' willingness to purchase organic food (OFPI). Skalko et al. (2017) stated that subjective norms, attitudes, and sense of behavioral control are all important determinants of organic food purchasing behavior. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1. PBC positively affects OFPI .
- H2. Subjective norms positively affect OFPI .
- H3. Attitude positively affects OFPI.

2.2 Producer, retailer and package labeling certification

Consumers who trust producers believe that the products they receive are truly organic, and as Vega-Zamora et al. (2019) show, consumers respond positively to information from producers attesting to the authenticity of their organic products. Therefore we propose the hypothesis:

- H4: Producers positively influence organic food purchase intentions

Retailers of organic food are essential. Trust in organic food sold by retailers or trust in organic private labels promotes purchase intentions (Khare and Pandey, 2017). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H5: Retailers positively influence organic food purchase intention

The more trust consumers have in the certification of organic food packaging labels the more inclined they are to purchase organic food. Organic labeling schemes usually have a logo of their own so that consumers can identify certified products at the point of sale (Golan et al., 2001). Therefore, we propose:

- H6: Package labeling certification positively influences organic food purchase intentions

2.3 Mediating role of attitudes and subjective norms

Although trust is an important determinant of consumers' organic food purchasing behavior, their effects may depend on other factors. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the mediating factors that may facilitate organic food purchases.

2.3.1 Mediating role of attitudes

Trust in producer and package labeling certification influences attitudes. If consumers agree with the information on the organic food label or have a positive attitude towards organic food, they are more likely to acquire it (Lee & Yun, 2015). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H7: Attitude plays a mediating role.

2.3.2 Mediating role of subjective norms

Many studies involving organic food have found that family and kinship influences play an important role in determining consumer behavior, especially as it relates to food choices (Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015; Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H8: Subjective norms play a mediating role.

2.4 Moderating effect of PBC

It is crucial to investigate potential factors that may interfere with trust in promoting organic food purchases. PBC may play a moderating role in the direct relationship between trust and purchase intentions. Specifically, if consumers have a high level of trust in the producer, retailer, and package labeling certification of organic foods, they perceive the quality of the products they purchase to be high and feel that their purchases are cost-effective (Cao et al., 2022; Sheth et al., 1991). The

contribution of trust to purchase intentions is more significant when consumers perceive that they have sufficient resources. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H9:PBC plays a role in positively influencing the conversion of trust to purchase intention

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Sample and data collection

The survey was conducted in July 2024 . The target respondents were residents of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, China. These locations, which are major markets for organic food sales, span the northern, central and southern parts of China and are representative of the population as they are provinces with net population inflow. A pre-survey of 400 samples was conducted, and the scale was calibrated and revised. We then commissioned Questionnaire Star, a professional questionnaire survey platform widely used in China, to conduct the survey. After excluding the consecutive responses and some unqualified responses with a short response time, we received 386 valid responses, about 62.7% of which were male and about 37.3% of which were female. Most of the respondents were between 30 and 45 years old. Half (50%) have a bachelor's degree. Most have a monthly income between 4000 and 8000 RMB.

3.2 Measures

The questionnaire consisted of two parts, the first part was about the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the second part was related to producers, retailers, packaging and labeling certifications, attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, quality, price, and purchase intentions of organic food. The majority of the question items were adapted from previous studies with some modifications to ensure validity.

3.3 Analytical techniques

We constructed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and analyzed the data using the partial least squares (PLS) method, which are some of the reasons why PLS-SEM was used in this study. Firstly, PLS is suitable for non-normal data or data with unknown distributions; and secondly, PLS-SEM is useful for examining complex models with mediating or moderating variables. Therefore, PLS-SEM is a suitable choice of model for our study and we tested the model using SmartPLS version 4.0.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1 Common method variance

The same respondent answered the entire questionnaire, which can lead to common method variance (CMV), threatening the validity of the scale. Harman's one-way analysis method was used to detect CMV (Schwarz, et al. 2017). The first factor explained 21.83% of the total variance, well below the 50% threshold (Harman 1967). The results suggest that CMV is not a serious threat to the data in this study.

Table 1. Reliability and validity tests of the constructs.

Construct	Items no.	Standard loadings	Cronbach's	CR	AVE
PDC	PDC1	0.917	0.901	0.938	0.834
	PDC2	0.903			
	PDC3	0.920			
RE	RE1	0.909	0.901	0.938	0.835
	RE2	0.911			
	RE3	0.921			

PLC	PLC1	0.917	0.890	0.932	0.820
	PLC2	0.901			
	PLC3	0.898			
AT	AT1	0.910	0.900	0.937	0.833
	AT2	0.915			
	AT3	0.912			
SN	SN1	0.914	0.906	0.941	0.841
	SN2	0.917			
	SN3	0.920			
PBC	PBC1	0.919	0.885	0.929	0.813
	PBC2	0.906			
	PBC3	0.879			
PI	PI1	0.898	0.865	0.917	0.787
	PI2	0.905			
	PI3	0.858			
Q	Q1	0.922	0.914	0.946	0.853
	Q2	0.921			
	Q3	0.927			
PC	PC1	0.926	0.925	0.952	0.869
	PC2	0.938			
	PC3	0.932			

Notes:AT=Attitude;SN=Subjective norms;PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer;PC=Price;Q=Quality;PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control.

4.2 The Measurement model

The measurement model verifies the reliability and validity of the data. Table 1 shows the results of construct reliability and validity tests. The scores of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are all greater than the critical value of 0.5, indicating that the convergent validity of the model is sufficient. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to evaluate the degree of internal consistency of the scales. Table 1 also shows that both Cronbach's alpha and CR values are above the threshold of 0.7, indicating good reliability of the data.

In this study, we used the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio to test the discriminant validity. As shown in Table 2, the square roots of ave (on the diagonal) were all greater than the inter structural correlations (other values in the matrix). This result indicates that the scale has good discriminant validity. Table 3 shows that most of the values are below the threshold of 0.9. The only two exceptions are the correlation between purchase intention and subjective norms, and the correlation between retailer and purchase intention. They are both greater than 0.90, indicating a potential discrimination problem.

However, their confidence intervals were below 1, suggesting that there is no significant problem of discriminant validity (Cao et al., 2021). Therefore, discriminant validity was established for all constructs.

We calculated the distributions of the variables based on the data from the established reliability and validity tests. Descriptive statistics indicated that price scored highest (Mean = 3.444; s.d. = 0.613) among the latent variables with the lowest score for perceived behavioral control (Mean = 3.209; s.d. = 1.042). Quality scores were higher (Mean = 3.437; s.d. = 1.057). Of these, producers (Mean = 3.419; s.d. = 0.978), retailers (Mean = 3.385; s.d. = 1.009), subjective norms (Mean = 3.391; s.d. = 1.017), package labeling certifications (Mean = 3.329; s.d. = 1.040), attitudes (Mean = 3.374; s.d. = 1.035) and purchase intention (Mean = 3.330; s.d. = 1.008).

Table 2. Correlations and square roots of AVEs (Fornell-Larcker criterion).

	SN	PC	PLC	AT	PBC	PDR	Q	PI	RE
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SN	0.917								
PC	0.690	0.932							
PLC	0.607	0.458	0.906						
AT	0.742	0.699	0.606	0.913					
PBC	0.603	0.448	0.468	0.548	0.902				
PCR	0.749	0.663	0.502	0.635	0.521	0.913			
Q	0.675	0.920	0.450	0.676	0.429	0.654	0.923		
PI	0.834	0.628	0.639	0.777	0.730	0.743	0.608	0.887	
RE	0.802	0.734	0.593	0.721	0.594	0.730	0.717	0.806	0.914

Notes:AT=Attitude;SN=Subjective norms;PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer;PC=Price;Q=Quality;PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) and confidence interval.

	SN	PC	PLC	AT	PBC	PDR	Q	PI
	0.754							
PC	[0.649,0.853]							
PLC	0.675	0.504						
	[0.582,0.760]	[0.394,0.612]						
AT	0.821	0.766	0.677					
	[0.733,0.896]	[0.665,0.861]	[0.594,0.757]					
PBC	0.673	0.495	0.528	0.612				
	[0.561,0.775]	[0.370,0.617]	[0.418,0.637]	[0.488,0.729]				
PDR	0.829	0.726	0.560	0.705	0.583			
	[0.726,0.916]	[0.617,0.826]	[0.448,0.666]	[0.589,0.813]	[0.462,0.697]			
Q	0.741	1.001	0.498	0.745	0.478	0.721		
	[0.626,0.851]	[0.985,1.016]	[0.378,0.614]	[0.633,0.849]	[0.345,0.603]	[0.602,0.832]		
PI	0.941	0.701	0.729	0.880	0.832	0.841	0.683	
	[0.881,0.990]	[0.590,0.806]	[0.641,0.811]	[0.803,0.944]	[0.725,0.903]	[0.741,0.931]	[0.564,0.796]	
RE	0.888	0.805	0.662	0.801	0.665	0.810	0.790	0.913
	[0.813,0.956]	[0.719,0.880]	[0.566,0.750]	[0.711,0.882]	[0.559,0.768]	[0.711,0.899]	[0.696,0.875]	[0.841,0.978]

Notes:AT=Attitude;SN= Subjective norms;PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer;PC=Price;Q=Quality;PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control.

4.3 Path relationship evaluations

The PLS-SEM algorithm was used to evaluate the structural model. The significance of the coefficients was obtained using the bootstrapping resampling method (5000 resamples).Hypothesis testing and structural relationships are shown in Table 4. The results show that:subjective norms ($\beta= 0.249, p<0.001$), attitudes ($\beta= 0.195, p<0.001$), and perceived behavioral control ($\beta= 0.270, p<0.001$) have a significant positive effect on purchase intention; in addition, package label authentication ($\beta= 0.254, p<0.001$), retailer ($\beta= 0.428, p< 0.001$) had a significant positive effect on attitude. Packaging labeling certification ($\beta= 0.168,p<0.001$), producer ($\beta= 0.325, p<0.001$) and retailer ($\beta= 0.466, p<0.001$) had a significant positive effect on subjective norms.

4.4 Analysis of mediating effects

We used bootstrapping to test mediating effects. Significant indirect effects were assessed using t-values and 95% confidence intervals. The specific indirect, direct and total effect components are shown in Table 5. Since none of the 95% confidence intervals are zero and the t-value > 1.96, we can conclude that attitude and subjective norms are significant mediators of purchase intention.

Table 4. Results of algorithm and bootstrapping tests.

Hypothesis	β	T-value	P-value
SN→PI	0.249	3.592	0.000
PLC → SN	0.168	3.713	0.000
PLC → AT	0.254	5.336	0.000
PLC → PI	0.082	2.462	0.014
AT → PI	0.195	3.573	0.000
PBC → PT	0.270	5.287	0.000
PDR → SN	0.325	3.863	0.000
PDR → AT	0.196	2.702	0.007
PDR → PI	0.135	2.918	0.004
RE → SN	0.466	5.476	0.000
RE → AT	0.428	5.679	0.000
RE → PI	0.159	2.249	0.025

Notes:AT=Attitude;SN=Subjective norms;PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer;PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control.

Table 5. The results of mediating effect analysis.

Hypotheses and paths	Indirect effects			Direct effects			Total effects		
	β	T-value	Confidence intervals	β	T-value	Confidence intervals	β	T-value	Confidence intervals
PLC → AT→PI	0.05	2.61	[0.018,0.092]	0.08	2.46	[0.012,0.145]	0.17	3.88	[0.085,0.260]
PLC → SN→PI	0	1	]	2	2	]	3	9]
PLC → PDR→AT→PI	0.04	2.24	[0.010,0.082]	0.08	2.46	[0.012,0.145]	0.17	3.88	[0.085,0.260]
PLC → PDR→SN→PI	2	1	]	2	2	]	3	9]
PLC → RE→AT→PI	0.03	2.01	[0.009,0.082]	0.13	2.91	[0.051,0.233]	0.25	3.61	[0.125,0.399]
PLC → RE→SN→PI	8	8	]	5	8	]	4	7]
PLC → RE→PDR→AT→PI	0.08	2.68	[0.026,0.144]	0.13	2.91	[0.051,0.233]	0.25	3.61	[0.125,0.399]
PLC → RE→PDR→SN→PI	1	9	]	5	8	]	4	7]
PLC → RE→RE→AT→PI	0.08	3.39	[0.036,0.132]	0.15	2.24	[0.039,0.315]	0.35	4.87	[0.217,0.505]
PLC → RE→RE→SN→PI	4	8	]	9	9	]	8	4]
PLC → RE→RE→PDR→AT→PI	0.11	3.21	[0.045,0.189]	0.15	2.24	[0.039,0.315]	0.35	4.87	[0.217,0.505]
PLC → RE→RE→PDR→SN→PI	6	2	]	9	9	]	8	4]

Notes:AT=Attitude;SN=Subjective norms;PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer.

4.5 The moderating role of contextual constraints and PBC

The product indicator method was used to evaluate the moderating effect of PBC. Contrary to the hypothesis, PBC has a significant negative moderating effect on retailers ($\beta = -0.079$, $p < 0.01$). When consumers perceive that they have a high level of control over their behavior, they tend to make more independent decisions, relying on their own abilities and judgments, rather than relying on the support or credibility provided by retailers and producers. This can lead to a decline in the impact of trust among consumers with a strong sense of behavioral control. Quality and price do not have a significant moderating effect on purchase intentions.

We can judge the overall explanatory power of the model by the value of R^2 (Zhang et al. 2019). The R^2 values of all endogenous variables are above 0.26, indicating the presence of large effect sizes. We also checked the Stone-Geisser-Criterion (Q^2) through the blindfolding technique in PLS-SEM with an omission distance of 7, which is used to assess the relative predictive relevance of structural models. When the value of Q^2 is greater than zero, the predictive accuracy of the path model is acceptable for a given structure. Attitude has the smallest Q^2 of 0.482, indicating that the predictive relevance of the PLS - SEM model meets the requirements.

Table 6. The results of moderating effect analysis.

Mode rator	Interacting	β	T-value	P- value
PBC	PBC*PDR → PI	-0.027	1.118	0.264
	PBC*RE → PI	-0.079	4.180	0.000
	PBC*PLC → PI	-0.027	1.090	0.276

Notes:PI=Purchase intention;PLC=Packaging label certification;PDR=Producer;RE=Retailer;PBC=Perceived Behavioral Control.

5. Discussion

This study examined the impact of trust on Chinese consumers' intentions to purchase organic food. The main findings are described below.

First, all dimensions of trust have a positive effect on consumers' organic food purchase intentions. This finding is consistent with previous research by Wei Shengrong (2020). Among them, trust in retailers has the largest positive effect on organic food purchase intention, trust in package labeling certification has the smallest positive effect on organic food purchase intention, and trust in producers is at an intermediate level. Retailers, as a direct end point to consumers, enhance consumers' immediate trust with their service quality, product display and after-sale guarantee (Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. 1994), whereas producers and certification labels belong to the indirect sources of trust (Lafferty et al., 2004). The discussion is in line with the existing studies.

Second, attitudes and subjective norms are mediating variables between organic food purchase intentions and trust. Specifically, subjective norms had a greater mediating effect than attitudes on producer and purchase intentions & retailer and purchase intentions, while attitudes were a greater mediator of package label certification and purchase intentions than subjective norms. These results confirm that subjective norms reflect individuals' perceived social pressures, i.e., the expectations of significant others or groups about their behavior, whereas attitudes are based more on individuals' evaluations of behavioral outcomes.

Finally, PBC negatively moderates trust in retailers. One potential explanation is that PBC emphasizes an individual's perception of his or her own capabilities and resources rather than reliance on external factors. If consumers perceive that they have sufficient ability and resources to purchase organic food, they may rely more on their own judgment than on the retailer's recommendation or trust. On the other hand, PBC did not play a moderating role in the transformation of trust in producers and package label certification to purchase intentions. Some studies have suggested that certification labels enhance purchase intention by simplifying the decision-making process (Lafferty et al, 2004), but consumers may take its existence for granted, so this study shows that the marginal contribution of trust to purchase intention is low. Overall, the moderating effect of PBC is not significant.

6. Conclusions, implications and limitations

6.1 Conclusion

First, trust is an important determinant of organic food purchase intention with different effects. Retailer trust has the largest positive effect on organic food purchase intention, package label

certification the smallest, and producer in between. Second, trust could influence purchase intentions through attitudes and subjective norms, with subjective norms being a greater mediating variable between retailers' and producers' trust and purchase intentions, whereas attitudes had a greater mediating effect than subjective norms on the relationship between package label certification and organic food purchase intentions. Finally, PBC negatively moderated the conversion of trust in organic food retailers to purchase intention for organic food, while its moderating effect was not significant for organic food producers and package labeling certification.

6.2 Implications

This study provides practical implications for organic food producers, retailers, and food safety authorities to promote organic food purchase intentions among Chinese residents. First, organic food producers and retailers should highlight the health attributes of organic food. For example, producers should adhere to strict production standards and provide nutritional reports on organic food. Retailers can also emphasize the health benefits of organic food to promote the market. Second, improve the authority and readability of certification labels. Finally, the internal factors of attitudes, subjective norms and the significant direct and indirect impact of PBC should not be ignored. Some sensitization is necessary to enhance citizens' positive attitudes towards organic food and to motivate their purchase intentions.

6.3 Limitations

This study has three limitations. First, we only examined the effects of trust related to certification of producers, retailers, and package labeling of organic food on purchase intentions for organic food. Further research could investigate the effects of other trusts. Second, the organic food purchase intention data were collected through an online survey using self-reported methods, which could lead to measurement error and sample selection bias. Future research could use actual behavioral data or experimental methods. Finally, we used a sample from China. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other cultures.

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