Thai Organic Food Demographics, Attitudes and Behavior

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Abstract
The demand for organic food has risen consistently with the increase in awareness of health and environmental issues, however the profiling of such consumers are still lacking. The aim of this paper is to identify consumers’ demographics and attitudes towards purchasing organic foods in Northern Thailand. Cross-sectional data were collected, through a survey conducted in supermarkets. Non-parametric tests were performed to identify the statistical significance of demographic variables to the respondents’ attitudes and behavior towards organic foods. Northern Thai consumers displayed positive attitudes towards organic foods and were informed about environmental and health issues. Consumers associated organic foods as very healthy and of good quality. Organic foods were perceived as high quality with the premium price, but accessibility through market outlets is limited. The attitudes towards organic foods were different among demographic variables in general. Older age, higher income levels, and married status groups had purchased organic foods in the past than other

Keywords: organic food, consumer behavior, consumer attitudes, perception, Thailand groups.

I. INTRODUCTION
Since organic foods are produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, they are well placed to answer consumers’ food safety concerns. There are a large number of studies about organic food consumption in many counties [1-10]. In particular, there is a paucity of studies on consumption trends in South East Asian countries such as Malaysia and Thailand [11-13] Although organic production and consumption had a small market shared, however it is growing rapidly. In Thailand, farmers need to raise consumers’ confidence in organic production as the little data we have indicates that there is not enough information for consumer and it is yet to be explored which factors affect organic foods are still limited in Thailand. The study seeks to examine the factors that affect consumers’ attitudes, behavior, and how differences of demographics show differences in behavior toward organic food.

II. METHODOLOGY
Cross-sectional consumer data were collected through a survey with 404 consumers in Chiang Mai province, during the period July-August 2011. Consumers shopping in the supermarkets were personally interviewed with the use of a
structured questionnaire using systematic sampling scheme. The questionnaire was designed to co consumers’ attitudes, intention and purchasing behavior towards organic foods.

Respondents were asked questions about several aspects, namely, organic food consumption, consumers’ attitudes, intention and purchasing behavior towards organic foods. A questionnaire of 23 items was developed. These items utilized a five-point Likert scale response categories, ranging from “strongly disagree (1)” to strongly agree (5)”.

The data analyses were conducted with SPSS for Windows statistical software (version 17). Cronbach α coefficient was estimated for the survey questions. Principle component analysis with varimax rotation was applied to assess the questionnaire’s reliability. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis for two-independent and k-independent samples, respectively) were used to identify the statistical significance (p-value) of demographic variables to attitudes and behavior toward organic food. The level of significance is set at 5%. The Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was used for analysis of all cases where two-independent samples were compared (female/male, and buyer/non-buyer) with respect for attitudes towards organic food. The education levels, income levels, the various age and marital status groups as well as household sizes were compared with Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test (k-independent samples). In case of statistical significant results, the pair wise distributions in each of the above variables were compared by Mann-Whitney. Apart from their statistical significance, sample means (m) were also analyzed for their clinical significance (their practical value). Only means with a difference greater than 0.5 were considered clinically significant.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Sample description

There was a slightly higher representation of females within the sample (61.6% of respondents are female), which is consistent with the northern Thai culture where women are more likely to do the food shopping compared with the male counterpart. All respondents were over 15 years old and more than quarter of them, (38.1%) belong to the 25-35 years old group. Most respondents had acquired a high level of education (58.7% had graduated from university/college and 6.2% had undertaken postgraduate studies). About 66.8% of the personal incomes had less than 10,000 Baht, 21% had an average personal income between 10,000 to 20,000 Baht, and 12% belong to an upper income level of more than 20,000 Baht. The National Office for Statistics in Thailand reports that the average monthly family income in 2009 was approximately 21,135 Baht (100 Baht ≈ 3.25 USD) compared

4.2 Attitude toward organic foods

The majority of respondents demonstrated positive attitudes towards organic foods. Over 70% of respondents considered organic foods to be healthier and safer to eat than conventional ones. Consumers claimed that organic food is a means of protecting the environment as the reasons; organic food consumption help protect our environment (84%), organic food does not use chemical pesticide (61%) and does not contain additives and artificial flavoring (50%). Consumers considered organic foods of high quality, compared to the conventional ones; more than 60% of them believed organic foods have higher quality since they do not contain chemical residues. The consumers said the attributes of organic foods are important. About 60% of consumers said the external appearance and color are important for consideration for buying, while approximately half of them said taste and smell of organic foods are more important. In addition, over 50% of the respondents indicated a preference in buying organic foods. In term of consumer awareness about organically produced food, 73% of the consumers claimed not to be sure about organic production and only 9% of the
respondents had confident about the claim on organic foods produced.

The environmental and health concerns were strong motives for consumers and affect organic food consumption. The issue of availability seems to be concern since the majority of consumers do not appear to be satisfied with the number of markets offering organic foods (66%) and the variety of organic food products available in these markets (50%). About 80% of consumers trust in organic foods that have labels than the ones that do not. Moreover, the price of organic foods in Chiang Mai province was an obstacle to the expansion of market shared. This study showed that about 47% of consumers considered organic foods prices are high.

4.3 Attitudes and demographics

Consumer attitudes towards organic food differed by gender. The differences recorded indicate that females considered that taste and external appearance of organic foods are important in the decision to buy organic foods when they are making comparisons with conventional ones (p=0.005). Moreover, females (n=3.73) are likely to trust the organic food label information (p=0.006), compared with males (n=3.48). According to Thai culture, females are the main shoppers for households and they agreed that the markets where they frequently shop do not sell a variety of organic foods (p=0.036). However, in both cases the differences between the mean values of the two genders are less than 0.5, an indication that female and males are practically the same. Education was found to be a significant determinant of attitudes towards organic foods. Consumers with a lower education believe in the value of organic foods more than other groups. The consumers with an elementary education (n=4.44) have a tendency to buy organic foods for people important to them, compared with high school (n=3.81) and university (n=3.90) educated respondents ( p = 0.017). Moreover, the elementary education respondents considered that taste in organic food is an important issue for their purchasing decision (p=0.03). In contrast, the respondents with higher education level seem not to believe that organic foods do not contain additives and artificial flavoring (p=0.002).

Consumers with higher income have higher intention to buy organic food, compared to lower income. In particular, they were more likely to purchase for the reasons of high levels of nutrition, food safety (p=0.001) and quality (p=0.012 ).

The attitude in term of accessibility of organic foods differed in the disparity of the income levels of the respondents. Higher income respondents agreed with the statement that they would buy organic food if they can get it conveniently (p=0.003). This can explain why about 62% of the respondents at a high income said that buying organic food is highly inconvenient even if they had the intention to buy. However, the accessibility is an obstacle for their purchasing of organic food. However, even though the lower income level has least intention to purchase organic food, compared with higher income because economic factors they trust in local producer of organic food are practicing organic farming (p=0.037). Organic consumption attitudes are also affected by consumers’ age. Older consumers have more positive attitudes towards organic food than all other age groups. Older consumers in the over 41years’ age group stated that they prefer organic food because it is free from additives and artificial flavoring (p=0.006 ). In addition, younger consumers (15-25 years old) and the older age (more than 55 years old) groups trust local producers of organic food are practicing organic farming, compared with other age groups (p=0.002).

Family size seems to be a factor on consumers’ attitudes and intention to purchase. The statistically significant differences observed were associated with the price of organic food that is important consideration when they are buying foods and the intention to buy organic food in the future. In particular, families of two
members seem to consider more about the organic food price, compared with others groups \((p = 0.0374)\). Consumers who have no other members in household likely do not have intention to buy organic food in the near future as much as the family that they have two or more family members \((p = 0.037)\). Those with children seem to be worried about health \((p = 0.047)\) and safety \((p = 0.013)\) issues, compared with single respondents. Married respondents have more concern about health than single ones do and are more likely to have positive attitudes towards organic foods than the single ones.

4.4 Behavior toward organic food

Previous experience with organic food had positively effects on attitudes and intention to purchase and had more intention to buy organic food. There were statistically significant differences between buyers and non-buyers in issues such as organic being safer to eat than conventional food \((p = 0.001)\) and organic foods are beneficial for health \((p = 0.001)\). In both cases, buyers seem to have more positive attitudes toward organic food. At the same time, buyers have a tendency to buy for people who are important to them. Statistical significant differences have also been recorded between the two groups in terms of information in media. Buyers have more knowledge about where to buy organic food based on promotions in the media \((p = 0.006)\).

Behavior towards organic food was likely not to be affected by demographic characteristics. Statistically significant variations between the buyers and non-buyers groups were observed with respect to their age, personal income, and marital status. Organic buyers tended to be older than the non-buyer groups. Although organic buyers likely to be female, 62% of female respondents said that, they had purchased organic foods in the past, compared to 38% of males. More than 60% of the respondents who had bought organic foods were married with children, compared to 50% married, and 37% single. Regarding income, 71% of organic buyers have a monthly personal income of over 30,000 Thai Baht, compared to 29% of the non-buyers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Results from this study are of great importance because they provide valuable information about consumers in Thailand that can be used by policy makers an organic farming. An interesting result is that consumer’ socio-demographic characteristics have influence on organic food consumption in Thailand. This study indicates that older, higher income and married are more likely to buy organic foods. The important criteria affecting consumers’ attitudes and buying behavior are health and environmental issues as well as product information and availability. Level of awareness, quality, availability and advertisement effect consumers’ attitudes and purchasing patterns, aside from safety issues external appearance has been identified as the most important attribute for purchasing.

The external appearance improvement and a smaller price differential between conventional and organic foods would be essential in order to increase the proportion of regular organic food purchasing. The recommendations on the implementation of Thai information and promotion campaign can be derived from finding in this paper. First, the information and promotion campaigns should focus on the health and environment benefit of organic foods. They should inform consumers that organic agriculture is environmental friendly because this production system has a less negative impact on the environment than conventional methods. In addition, consumers show an increasing appreciation for the health attributes of food products.

Thus, the promotion campaign should indicate that organic food produced is healthier than conventional ones. Communications to consumers that associate organic foods with health would be very important to get new consumers into the organic market. Second, the availability and variety of organic food in market are limited. Consumers claimed that they are not satisfied
with the availability of organic food in market outlets. Thus, the promotion campaign should provide more information about the place where consumers can buy a variety of organic food products should be increased. Third, the extent of the information and promotion campaign should be as broad as possible. For the younger age and single status groups, campaigns should focus on how to attract these groups to be more interested in organic food produce.

REFERENCES


