

Understanding Cross-Cultural Variations in Organic Food Purchasing Within Retail Context: A Motivations-Barriers Framework

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ABSTRACT

The global organic food market has expanded rapidly, surpassing USD 200 billion in 2023, yet adoption rates remain uneven across cultural contexts. While consumer motivations such as health consciousness, environmental concern, and ethical values drive demand, barriers including price sensitivity and skepticism toward certification continue to inhibit widespread adoption. Existing studies often examine these drivers in isolation or within single-country settings, limiting cross-cultural generalizability. This conceptual paper develops the Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework, integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions with the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explain how cultural values moderate the salience of motivations and barriers in shaping organic food purchasing. The framework highlights how

individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation influence consumer decision pathways, while also acknowledging the role of economic moderators such as price sensitivity. From a retailing perspective, the framework underscores the importance of tailoring product labelling, in-store communication, and certification strategies to align with cultural expectations. Theoretically, this work bridges cultural psychology and sustainable consumption, advancing understanding of cross-national differences in consumer behavior. Practically, it offers actionable insights for marketers, retailers, and policymakers to design culturally responsive strategies that foster sustainable food consumption and contribute to global sustainability goals.

Keywords: *Cross-cultural consumer behavior, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Organic food, Retail strategies, Theory of Planned Behavior*

INTRODUCTION

The global organic food market has experienced exponential growth, surpassing \$200 billion in 2023, largely fueled by rising consumer awareness of health, sustainability, and ethical production (Willer et al., 2023). Despite this expansion, adoption rates continue to vary considerably across cultural contexts. For instance, organic products represent nearly 10% of total food sales in Germany, compared to less than 2% in India (FiBL, 2023). Such stark contrasts highlight the importance of understanding not only individual motivations and barriers but also broader cultural influences that shape consumer behavior.

Existing research has extensively examined individual-level drivers of organic food consumption, such as health consciousness, environmental concern, and ethical awareness, as well as barriers including price sensitivity, availability, and lack of trust in certification systems (Asif et al., 2018). However, much of this scholarship has been conducted within single-country contexts, limiting generalizability across diverse cultural settings. This oversight is critical, as cultural values exert systematic influence on how motivations and barriers are prioritized by consumers. For example, Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, such as individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, provide a useful lens for explaining why motivations differ across societies. In highly individualistic cultures, such as the United States, health-driven and self-oriented motivations often dominate. In contrast, collectivist societies, such as China, are more likely to emphasize social norms, family welfare, and communal well-being when purchasing organic food (Yin et al., 2022).

Despite these insights, an integrative framework that explicitly connects cultural values with motivations and barriers to organic food purchasing remains underdeveloped. The absence of such a framework leaves marketers, policymakers, and researchers with fragmented understandings that limit the ability to design effective strategies for promoting organic adoption across nations. Addressing this gap is critical not only for advancing theoretical understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior but also for informing practical interventions to support sustainable food systems worldwide.

This conceptual paper introduces the Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework, which synthesizes Hofstede's cultural dimensions with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The framework posits that cultural values moderate the relative importance consumers assign to motivations (e.g., health, environmental concern) and barriers (e.g., price, trust), thereby offering an explanation for cross-national differences in organic food adoption. The contribution of this work is twofold. Theoretically, it bridges cultural psychology with sustainable consumption literature by embedding cultural dimensions into the study of consumer decision-making. Practically, it provides actionable guidance for tailoring marketing campaigns and policy interventions. For instance, strategies that

emphasize individual health benefits may be more persuasive in individualistic contexts, while campaigns highlighting communal values or collective welfare may be more effective in collectivist cultures.

Likewise, standardized certifications and trust-building mechanisms may be particularly important in cultures characterized by high uncertainty avoidance. By clarifying how cultural contexts interact with consumer motivations and barriers, the proposed framework advances scholarly understanding of organic food behavior and offers practical pathways for global strategies aimed at fostering sustainable consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organic food purchasing behavior has been extensively studied through the lens of consumer motivations and barriers. Research identifies three primary motivations driving organic food consumption: health consciousness (Yadav & Pathak, 2017), environmental concern (Paul & Rana, 2012), and ethical values (Aschemann-Witzel & Niebuhr Aagaard, 2014). Consumers perceive organic products as healthier alternatives to conventional options, with studies showing strong correlations between health concerns and organic purchases (Yadav & Pathak, 2017). Environmentalists are motivated by the sustainable production methods associated with organic farming (Paul & Rana, 2012), while ethical consumers consider animal welfare and fair-trade practices (Aschemann-Witzel & Niebuhr Aagaard, 2014).

However, significant barriers persist in organic food adoption. Price premiums remain the most frequently cited obstacle (Schleenbecker & Hamm, 2013), creating accessibility challenges for price-sensitive consumers. Trust issues also hinder market growth, particularly regarding the authenticity of organic certifications (Gracia & de Magistris, 2016). Research shows that consumers often doubt the credibility of organic labels, especially when certification processes are not transparent (Gracia & de Magistris, 2016).

Cross-cultural studies reveal important variations in these motivations and barriers. Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions framework provides critical insights into these differences. In individualistic cultures like the United States, consumers prioritize personal health benefits when purchasing organic foods (Yin et al., 2018), reflecting the cultural emphasis on self-care. Conversely, collectivist cultures such as China place greater emphasis on social norms, where organic purchases are often influenced by family expectations and community values (Yin et al., 2018). Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, exemplified by Japan, demonstrate greater skepticism toward organic labels unless accompanied by rigorous certification processes (Thøgersen, 2010), highlighting the role of institutional trust in purchasing decisions.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) further explains these cross-cultural variations. While health benefits form a universal positive attitude toward organic foods (Yadav & Pathak, 2017), the importance of subjective norms varies significantly between cultural contexts (Yin et al., 2018). Perceived behavioral control factors like product accessibility and affordability are also interpreted differently across cultures (Thøgersen, 2010). These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a framework for understanding how cultural values influence organic food purchasing behavior.

Theoretical Foundation and Framework Development

The proposed framework builds upon two foundational theoretical perspectives to examine cross-cultural variations in organic food purchasing behavior. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede et al., 2010) provides the cultural lens, identifying how national cultural values systematically influence consumer decision-making. Particularly relevant are the dimensions of individualism-collectivism, where individualistic societies tend to prioritize personal health benefits when evaluating organic products, while collectivist cultures place greater emphasis on social norms and family expectations (Nguyen et al., 2020). The uncertainty avoidance dimension explains why consumers in high-uncertainty cultures demand more rigorous organic certification standards (Rana & Paul, 2020), while long-term orientation helps explain sustainability-focused purchasing in certain societies (Wang et al., 2022).

Complementing this cultural perspective, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) offers a psychological framework for understanding individual decision-making processes. Recent applications in organic food research demonstrate that attitudes (personal evaluations of organic benefits) typically serve as the strongest predictor in Western contexts (Scalco et al., 2020), while subjective norms (perceived social expectations) dominate in collectivist cultures (Tandon et al., 2021). Perceived behavioral control, particularly regarding price and availability, emerges as a universal barrier, though its relative importance varies across economic contexts (Kushwah et al., 2021).

The integrated Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework synthesizes these theoretical perspectives by proposing culture-specific pathways to organic food purchase. In individualistic Western markets, the attitude-behavior link predominates, with health consciousness driving purchases (Wang et al., 2022). Collectivist Eastern markets follow a normative pathway where social approval and family expectations outweigh personal attitudes (Tandon et al., 2021). High-uncertainty cultures require an additional trust-building step, where perceived control depends heavily on certification credibility (Rana & Paul, 2020). The framework also accounts for economic moderators, recognizing that price sensitivity interacts with cultural values - showing stronger effects in high power distance cultures where income disparities are pronounced (Kushwah et al., 2021).

Recent empirical studies (2019-2023) provide robust support for this integrated approach. Cross-cultural comparisons in ASEAN markets confirm the moderating role of individualism-collectivism on purchase motivations (Nguyen et al., 2020), while Indian research validates the heightened role of subjective norms in collectivist contexts (Tandon et al., 2021). European studies demonstrate how long-term orientation predicts sustainable consumption patterns (Wang et al., 2022), and multinational research reveals how price barriers vary across cultural-economic contexts (Kushwah et al., 2021). These findings collectively support the CMB framework's value in explaining and predicting organic food purchasing behavior across diverse cultural settings. Building on these insights, the Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework is presented to visually synthesize the theoretical foundations and pathways discussed. Figure 1 illustrates how cultural dimensions, and psychological factors interact with economic moderators to shape cross-cultural variations in organic food purchasing behavior.

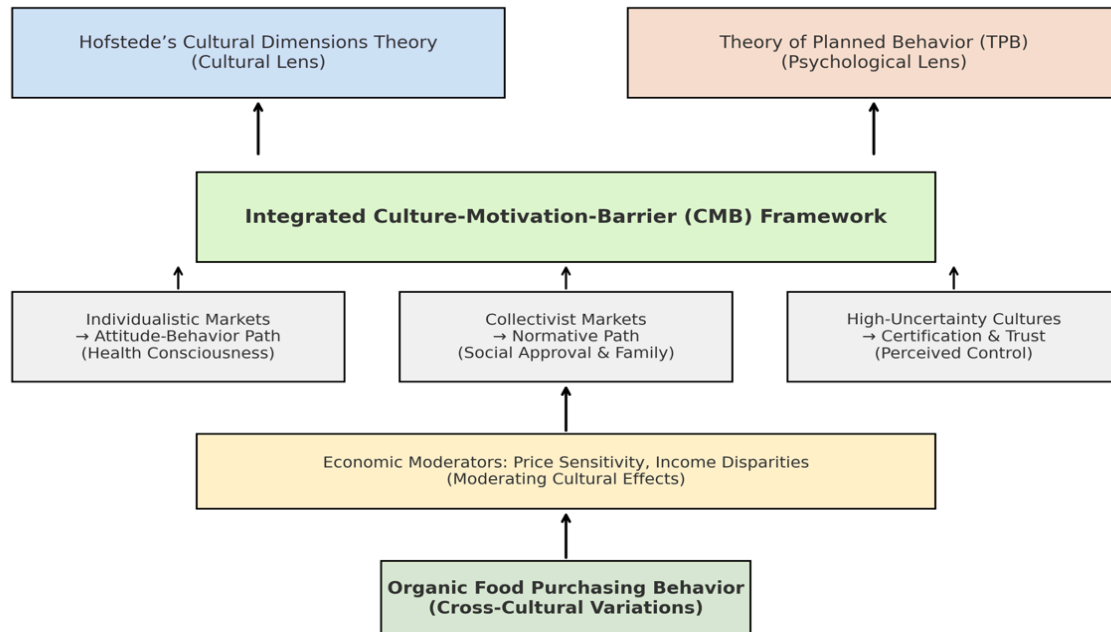


Figure 1. The Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) Framework for Cross-Cultural Variations in Organic Food Purchasing Behavior

(Source: Adapted from Hofstede et al., 2010; Ajzen, 1991)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a rigorous, theory-driven methodology to develop the Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework through systematic conceptual research (Jaakkola, 2020). The approach begins with comprehensive theoretical synthesis, integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010) with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to examine how national cultural values moderate established psychological predictors of organic food purchases. Recent cross-cultural studies (2018-2023) are systematically analyzed to identify patterns in how individualism-collectivism shapes health versus environmental motivations (Nguyen et al., 2021), how uncertainty avoidance influences certification trust requirements (Rana & Paul, 2020), and how long-term orientation affects sustainability concerns (Wang et al., 2022). The literature review focuses on peer-reviewed articles from Scopus and Web of Science using targeted keyword combinations ("organic food" + "cross-cultural" + "Hofstede" + "TPB"), with strict inclusion criteria ensuring only high-quality, recent multi-country studies inform the framework development (Tandon et al., 2021).

Following theory integration, the methodology progresses to structured framework development through proposition formulation and visual modeling. Testable hypotheses are derived about cultural moderation effects, such as collectivism strengthening subjective norms' influence (Kushwah et al., 2021) or high-uncertainty cultures requiring additional trust mediators (Scalco et al., 2020). The CMB framework's validity is then assessed through critical analysis against established theoretical criteria (MacInnis, 2011) and empirical alignment with recent findings, particularly regarding emerging contradictions in developing markets where price sensitivity interacts unexpectedly with environmental values (Kushwah et al., 2021). Analytical rigor is ensured through content analysis categorizing evidence by cultural dimension and TPB construct, combined with gap-spotting techniques (Sandberg & Alvesson,

2020) to identify unresolved questions about why certain motivations dominate in specific cultural contexts. The methodology concludes with theoretical saturation checks to confirm comprehensive construct coverage and peer debriefing with cross-cultural consumer behavior experts, ultimately producing both a testable conceptual framework and specific propositions for future empirical validation across different cultural market types (individualistic vs. collectivist, high vs. low uncertainty avoidance).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework developed in this study advances current understanding of cross-cultural variations in organic food purchasing behavior by explicitly embedding cultural dimensions within the Theory of Planned Behavior. The discussion is structured into three domains: theoretical implications, managerial implications, and policy implications. Together, these highlights both the scholarly contribution and the practical relevance of the proposed framework.

Theoretical Implications

The primary theoretical contribution of the CMB framework lies in bridging cultural psychology with consumer behavior models in sustainable consumption. Previous research has largely employed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in single-country contexts (Yadav & Pathak, 2017; Tandon et al., 2021), emphasizing attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as predictors of organic food purchases. However, such approaches have overlooked how cultural contexts systematically alter the weight of these predictors. By integrating Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the CMB framework provides a more holistic lens to explain why the same motivations and barriers produce divergent outcomes across societies.

For instance, in individualistic cultures such as the United States, health-driven attitudes toward organic food exert the strongest influence on purchase decisions (Nguyen et al., 2020). In contrast, collectivist societies such as China or India place greater emphasis on subjective norms and family expectations (Yin et al., 2018). Similarly, cultures high in uncertainty avoidance, such as Japan, demand stronger institutional trust and certification transparency before adopting organic products (Thøgersen, 2010). By accounting for these cultural contingencies, the CMB framework enhances the explanatory power of TPB and contributes to a more culturally grounded understanding of sustainable consumption.

Another theoretical implication concerns the interaction of cultural and economic moderators. The inclusion of power distance and price sensitivity acknowledges the economic realities that often amplify or attenuate cultural effects. For example, price barriers are particularly salient in high power distance cultures, where income inequalities shape purchasing capacity (Kushwah et al., 2021). The CMB framework thus not only enriches theory by recognizing culture as a moderator but also by positioning economic context as a critical co-determinant of sustainable consumption behavior.

Managerial Implications

From a retail perspective, the CMB framework generates several actionable insights for marketers and managers. First, it highlights the importance of culturally tailored retail strategies. In individualistic contexts, marketing campaigns should emphasize personal health benefits, convenience, and lifestyle alignment. Conversely, in collectivist cultures, messages that frame organic food as beneficial for family welfare, community health, and environmental preservation are likely to resonate more strongly (Yin et

al., 2022). Retailers can operationalize this through packaging design, promotional messages, and in-store displays that highlight culturally relevant benefits.

Second, the framework suggests that store layout and product placement play a vital role in influencing purchase decisions. In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, retailers should prioritize visibility of certification logos, provide detailed product information, and ensure prominent positioning of organic goods to reduce perceived risk (Grunert et al., 2014). In contrast, in long-term oriented cultures, narratives around sustainability and intergenerational well-being should be integrated into product labeling and digital communication strategies.

Third, the rise of digital retailing and e-commerce platforms presents new opportunities to embed cultural cues. Online platforms can personalize marketing messages based on consumer cultural orientation, such as highlighting family endorsements in collectivist regions or promoting health-related influencers in individualistic societies. This aligns with emerging research suggesting that digital environments can replicate, and even amplify, cultural determinants of consumer behavior (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2012).

Finally, retailers should consider pricing strategies that address cultural-economic intersections. For example, offering smaller package sizes or loyalty-based discounts in price-sensitive, high power distance cultures can enhance accessibility. In more affluent, individualistic markets, premium branding may be strategically leveraged to appeal to consumers' self-image and identity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The CMB framework also offers guidance for policymakers seeking to foster sustainable consumption. First, governments in high uncertainty avoidance cultures should implement transparent certification systems that build consumer trust. Public-private partnerships that standardize labeling and certification can reduce skepticism and encourage adoption. For example, the European Union's standardized organic logo has significantly improved consumer trust across member states (Gracia & de Magistris, 2016).

Second, policy interventions must account for income disparities in high power distance societies. Subsidies, price support mechanisms, or tax incentives for organic farmers can lower costs and make organic food more accessible to lower-income households (Bryła, 2016). Such measures not only improve affordability but also support national goals for healthier populations and environmental sustainability.

Third, linking organic food adoption to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) can provide a global policy framework for encouraging sustainable food systems (United Nations, 2015). Integrating cultural sensitivity into SDG implementation strategies will ensure that sustainability agendas resonate with diverse populations, rather than assuming a one size fits all approach.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper advances the discourse on cross-cultural consumer behavior by proposing the Culture-Motivation-Barrier (CMB) framework, which integrates Hofstede's cultural dimensions with the Theory of Planned Behavior. The framework addresses a critical gap in the literature by illustrating how cultural values systematically moderate consumer motivations and barriers toward organic food

purchasing. While prior studies have extensively examined individual drivers such as health consciousness and environmental concern, the neglect of cultural influences has limited the generalizability of findings across diverse societies. By embedding cultural dimensions into consumer decision-making models, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of why organic food adoption varies significantly between nations.

The framework also contributes practical insights for stakeholders. Marketers can design targeted campaigns that resonate with culturally dominant values emphasizing self-oriented benefits in individualistic contexts and collective welfare in collectivist societies. Policymakers and certification bodies can enhance consumer trust in high-uncertainty cultures through stricter standards and transparent labeling. Additionally, recognizing the role of economic moderators such as price sensitivity in high power distance societies allows for better-informed strategies to make organic products more accessible. These recommendations underscore the value of the CMB framework as a guide for both theory-driven inquiry and policy development.

Looking forward, future research should empirically validate the propositions of the CMB framework through cross-national comparative studies, particularly in emerging markets where affordability, certification, and cultural diversity intersect. Longitudinal studies may also shed light on how shifts in cultural orientations such as increasing individualism in traditionally collectivist societies affect organic food purchasing patterns over time. By integrating cultural, psychological, and economic factors, the CMB framework provides a robust foundation for advancing sustainable consumption practices. Ultimately, this research highlights that fostering global adoption of organic food requires not only understanding consumer motivations and barriers but also appreciating the cultural contexts in which these decisions are embedded.

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