

# A Review on organic consumption in young India: A push by leveraging Subjective Norms through effective communication in the age of social media

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**Abstract:** Organic consumption is a world-wide phenomenon. India being one of the leading producers of organic food still stands in line of the leading suppliers, not the consumer of organic foods. Consumer attitude towards Organic food has been found to be generally positive in India, but there is an attitude-behavior gap as the adoption of Organic food is very slow. Though, many recent studies show that Indian consumers, especially youngsters are becoming more inclined to organic consumption. This study explores the crucial role of Subjective Norm (SN) in influencing the consumer choice. Subjective Norm is an individual's perception or opinion about what important others believe the individual should do. The fact that India is a collectivist society where individuals have an urge to belong to some social group and conform to the group consumption behavior, the dynamics of Subjective Norms have an extremely important role to play. As Subjective Norms and purchase Intention (PI) are strongly correlated, it is highly desirable that marketers focalize with specific strategy on integrated marketing communication to attract the young consumers. Since, it is the age of social media, it can be easily facilitated to design and disseminate messages that influence the subjective norms by motivating them to conform to what is largely acceptable and desirable behavior; thereby affecting their attitude leading to increase in the purchase Intention. This paper postulates how leveraging Subjective Norm in marketing messages can effectively encourage organic food choice.

**Key Words:** Subjective Norm, Organic food, attitude-behavior gap, effective communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

In the backdrop of buzz around sustainable living and consumption it is high time that marketers take initiatives to drive a change in the Indian society through effective marketing communication, thereby establishing their brand as socially responsible and bringing about a positive change.

Through many studies researchers have identified various important factors that are responsible for Organic food choice and among these, Subjective norm is one. Subjective norms not only play a role in attitude formation but also influence people by making them more receptive and aware of what others expect of them. Subjective norms are further categorized as Normative and informational influence by Bearden and Etzel (1982). Normative influences explain a person's compliance to social norms to avoid negative consequences (like punishment or disassociation with important groups) due to non-conformity (Price et al., 1987; Kropp et al., 2005) whereas informational influence is about group influence in a product/service choice.

Subjective norms act as a strong influential factor in attitude formation in early stages of innovation when people have limited/no firsthand experience to develop an attitude (Taylor & Todd, 1995). The importance of exploring this factor also comes from the fact that there is a strong positive relation between Subjective norm and Purchase Intention. (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Armitage and Conner (2001), Chen (2007).

In the era of social media, which acts as a new dimension of influence on one's social norm, particularly youngsters; the impact of Subjective norm on Purchase Intention is even more. Youngsters now pickup and propagate new consumer trends. So, it can be argued that when communicated effectively by influencing Subjective norm, it may result in higher Purchase intention. Hence, this study proposes a thorough investigation/work on this subject.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

### Subjective Norm

Subjective Norms refer to a set of beliefs vindicated or approved by an important person or group to support a particular behavior. Subjective Norms are perceived social pressure from others by an individual to behave in a certain manner. (Ham, M., Jeger, M., & Ivković, A. F., 2015).

Ajzen has explained Subjective Norm as a perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform a behavior in question (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188). Said more precisely, Subjective norm is an individual's perception or opinion about what 'important others' believe the individual should do. It is also explained as a person's perception regarding approval or disapproval of his/her behavior by significant others (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991; Finlay, Trafimow, & Moroi, 1999, p. 2015 Ajzen, Brown, & Carvajal, 2004).

Subjective norms affect people by making them aware and perceptive to what others expect of them and how far the individual is ready to comply with their expectations. Since Subjective norms are built upon beliefs that are important for individuals in their lives, any change in Subjective norm has a far reaching impact. Discussing the kind of impact it can have, Bearden and Etzel (1982) categorized interpersonal influence into **normative and informational social influence**. Normative influence is about a person's compliance to social norms to avoid negative consequences in group settings due to non-conformity. While social norms explain how an individual complies/changes (behavior) to avoid punishments or disassociation with important groups. (Price et al., 1987; Kropp et al., 2005). These normative behavior help individuals to gain acceptance among peers (Bearden and Rose, 1990). The dimension of Informational influence is related to group influence with respect to product/service choices. People tend to adhere to group norms and values if it is beneficial and improves their position (Rimal et al., 2005). Thus, **Subjective norms exert social pressure by serving as a source of information for appropriate/desirable behavior thereby ensuring that people engage in certain behavior** (Jager, 2000).

It has been found that subjective norms act as a strong influential factor in attitude formation in early stages of innovation when people have limited/no firsthand experience to develop an attitude (Taylor & Todd, 1995). So, it is remarkable here that at this stage the shoppers' propensity to buy can be influenced through proper communication by marketers, thus affecting the attitude development in its nascent stage (Yu and Wu, 2007).

In Some studies influence of social norms in predicting pro-environmental beliefs and attitudes have been examined. Social norms influenced consumers' willingness to purchase green products. In her research on adolescents, Lee (2008) found that social influence, environmental concern, self-image, and perceived environmental responsibility determined green purchase behavior. Social influence was the most important predictor affecting consumers' green purchase behavior. For healthy eating in adolescents with respect to subjective norm family members and government has been found to be most influential groups (Chan et al., 2009), as also friends and colleagues.

### **Subjective Norm and Purchase Intention**

The importance of subjective norm also comes from the fact that Subjective Norm greatly influences Purchase intention of consumers. Many studies found a strong positive relationship between Subjective Norm and Purchase Intention through various significant studies (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Shim and Drake, 1990; Ajzen, 1991; Chang, 1998; Kim and Karpova, 2010; May, 2005; Nysveen et al., 2005; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2005; Lin, 2008; Laohapensang, 2009).

In a meta-analysis of 87 studies Sheppard, Hartwick and Warshaw (1988) have suggested a modification through their model by including SN in the basic model of TRA, where the correlation between attitude plus SN and PI increases significantly as against the correlation between Intention and behavior in basic TRA model.

Chang's (1998) study presents a more thorough examination of correlation between Subjective Norm and attitude towards behavior by testing the causal link from norms to attitude. He proposes that influence of social environment has a significant impact on individual's attitude formation.

In India, Purchase decisions reflect consumers' need to conform to social values and norms (Khare A., 2011) as social conformance is given more importance than individual achievement. Group identity and affiliations are significant aspect of individual's identity in a collectivist society like India.

Though, Sparks et al. (1995) considered subjective norm as the weakest predictor of intentions and, consequently, removed subjective norms from their study. However, Armitage and Conner (2001) have demonstrated that subjective norms have a strong relationship with intention. Chen (2007) also found that when a person's Subjective Norm was positive his PI is significantly high.

Further, it is well established that Persuasive messages elicit attitude change when they present reinforcements for attitude change (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). And, which is why it can be argued that effective communication is most relevant at this stage of attitude formation.

### **Communication and Food choice behavior/attitude change**

The impact and role of communication related to food products have gained considerable attention in recent years. Consumers' food choices and dietary behavior get remarkably affected by communication and information. Verbeke (2008) argues that Communication and information provision efforts can have an impact in terms of changing consumers' knowledge, shaping their attitudes and redirecting their decision making in terms of Purchase intention, including food choices and dietary behavior. This change in consumer behavior is determined by both personal and environmental factors (contextual-Subjective norm). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) the final change in one's behavior occurs mostly due to the change in an individual's attitude.

The Yale Model of the Yale School of Communication and Persuasion (McGuire, 1996) argues that communication-induced attitude change can be divided into communicator, message, and recipient variables. Although it appeared recently that argument quality is the most manipulated communication dimension when it comes to persuasive communication (Petty et al., 1976). Hovland et al. (1953) has proposed that if a persuasive message is relevant to the individual, it would be noticed and considered carefully. According to him the opinions are learnt and the new learning overlays the old knowledge to produce change. Thus, attitude change is viewed as a function of message learning.

### **Role of Subjective norms on organic/green food choice behavior**

Factors that affect food choice are basically put in three categories: factors related to the food, the individual making choice and the external and social environment within which the choice is made. Out of all these the post-ingestional consequences appear to be one of the major concerns by which preferences develop. Additionally, other important factors are marketing and economic variables, as well as social, cultural, religious or demographic factors are also likely to be very important (Murcott, 1989; Shepherd, 1989).

Social norms and groups greatly influence consumer's attitude towards green products (Kalafatis et al. , 1999; Chan, 2000; Chan and Lau, 2002; Harland et al. , 2007; Lee, 2008, 2009; Jansson et al. , 2010; Cheah and Phau, 2011; Kim and Chung, 2011; Park and Sohn, 2012).The adoption of green products not only happens due to environmental concerns but also due to social pressure. In order to gain acceptance and recognition in groups individuals seek group conformity (Bearden and Etzel, 1982).

Positive subjective norms significantly enhance the consumer's intention to buy organic food. (Ham, M., Jeger, M., & Ivković, A. F., 2015)

Vermeir and Verbeke (2006 ) and Chen (2007) found a significant positive relationship between subjective norms and a consumer's intention to buy sustainable and organic food. 'When a consumer has a positive subjective norm to purchase organic foods, he or she will be more likely to have the intention of purchasing organic foods.'

Indians being collectivistic by nature (Hofstede, 1980; Sinha and Verma, 1987; Sinha and Verma, 1987; Triandis, 1995), put a lot of emphasis on relationships with other members of the group so their decisions are governed by the influence of significant others as the interconnectedness and group conformity among people play a central role in each person's identity.

**As social group acceptance and conformance is important for Indian consumers; marketers should create Consumer involvement and engagement through advertising and promotional campaigns** that use social groups for marketing green products. (Khare, A., 2014)

### **Organic food choice, Social Media & Subjective Norms**

Social media, for younger generation is undoubtedly another dimension of social influence which hugely impact their social norms.

Feick et al. (2003) documents that social network and product involvements are correlated. Young consumers are greatly influenced by their social network (e.g. family, friends, coworker, etc.), as they collect information from them and finally they decide about their brand choice. It is further observed that **in the age of social media youngsters get hugely impacted in their purchase intentions and decisions due to their active presence on social network** (Business Wire, 2009.) **Thereby, it is highly desirable that marketers focalize with specific strategy on integrated marketing communication** involving social media to attract the young consumers, using themes like environmental protection, effective use of natural resources, environmental quality, recycling & reusing, eco - packaging, eco- labeling and healthy life (Velnampy, T., & Achchuthan, S. , 2016).

Kelly Burke, founder/ creative director, IDR Productions in Laguna Beach, Calif says that Social media is an absolute must if any brand wants to be deemed credible. She further claims that "A whopping 50 percent customers will look to social media first to determine if you are even a credible company, search for reviews, etc." (Renfrow, J. (2016) Social group acceptance and conformance is important for Indian consumers; advertising and promotional campaigns should use social groups for marketing green products. Consumer involvement and engagement can be created through social networking web sites. (Khare, A., 2014)

### **3. CONCLUSION :**

Considering the stage of organic consumption in India, positive attitude formation seems highly relevant to the organic marketing scenario. Further, this whole exercise of attitude development is very important to build a positive purchase intention/behavior in the prospective organic consumers.

**In the era of social media, which acts as a new dimension of influence on one's social norm, particularly youngsters; the impact of Subjective norm on Organic food Purchase Intention is even more.** Youngsters now respond to sustainable and Organic food choice trends. So, it can be argued that **when communicated effectively by influencing Subjective norm, it may result in higher Purchase intention.** Hence, this study proposes a thorough investigation on this subject.

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