

## From perceived need to purchasing behavior: A study on the formation mechanism of consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food

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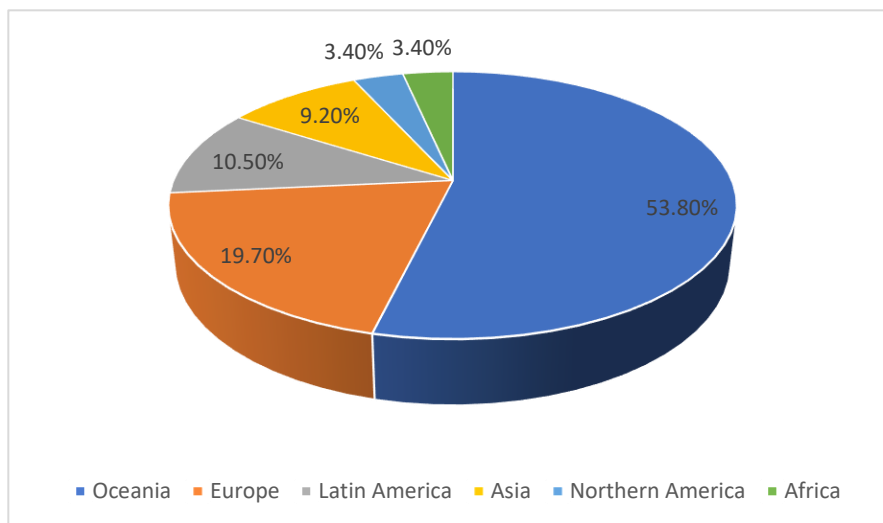
**Abstract:** As food safety concerns grow increasingly prominent, consumers are placing greater emphasis on health, nutrition, and sustainable consumption. Organic foods, with their eco-friendly and safety attributes, are gradually becoming a market focus. This paper centers on consumer behavior, drawing upon consumer behavior theory, signaling theory, and ABC theory to construct a framework for the formation mechanism of willingness to pay a premium for organic foods. The study reveals the psychological pathway through which consumers, when faced with organic foods, transform cognitive judgments and emotional attitudes into purchase intentions and premium payment decisions. This framework broadens the theoretical perspective of organic food consumption research and provides systematic theoretical support for sustainable consumption studies. While offering valuable theoretical insights, the study has certain limitations. Future research could enhance the systematicity and applied value of organic food consumption behavior studies by collecting specific sample data and conducting cross-national empirical analyses.

**Keywords:** Consumer behavior, Organic food, Premium payment, Purchasing behavior.

### 1. Introduction

Faced with increasingly prominent food safety issues, countries urgently need to adopt practical and effective countermeasures in the field of sustainable development, with food production being one of the key links in this process [1]. In recent years, frequent food quality incidents reported in many parts of the world have prompted profound public reflection on traditional food production methods. This reflection has gradually led people to recognize that food production should not only pursue yield and economic benefits but also focus on the impact of production processes on the ecological environment and natural resources, as well as the potential food safety risks they may pose [2]. As consumer concern for food safety continues to rise, against the backdrop of the ongoing “Pesticide-Free Food Initiative” and the widespread promotion of green food concepts, health and nutritional factors have become crucial considerations for consumers when selecting food products [3]. Driven by this shift in consumer mindset, organic food has gradually entered the mainstream market, becoming a significant symbol of healthy eating and sustainable consumption. Consumers widely perceive organic food as meeting higher safety and health standards due to reduced chemical additives in production. Its nutritional value and environmentally friendly attributes are also widely recognized.

According to statistics from the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), by the end of 2023, the total area of organically managed farmland worldwide (including land in conversion to organic farming) reached approximately 98.9 million hectares, marking a year-on-year increase of about 2.6% and accounting for roughly 2.1% of the global agricultural land area. Simultaneously, over 70% of consumers worldwide expressed willingness to pay a premium for organic food, demonstrating strong recognition and positive purchasing intent toward organic products. This trend reflects heightened public health awareness and underscores society's strong pursuit of green, sustainable lifestyles [4].

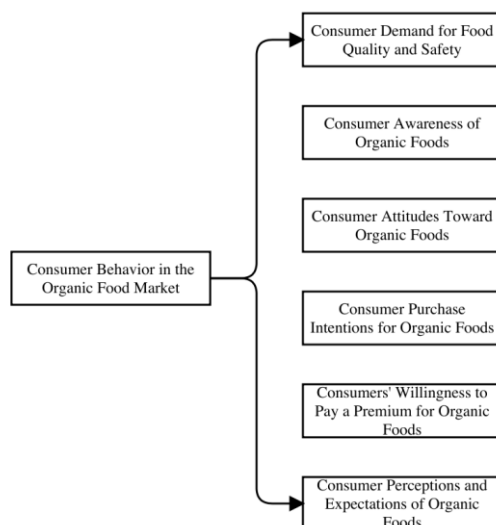


**Figure 1.**  
Global Organic Farmland Area in 2023.  
**Source:** The World of Organic Agriculture 2025.

However, despite the clear advantages of organic food in terms of quality, safety, and ecological benefits, consumers still harbor numerous concerns during actual purchases. Some consumers question the high prices of organic products, the transparency of certification systems, and their genuine health benefits. This has, to some extent, weakened their purchasing confidence and constrained the further development of the organic food market. How to effectively enhance consumer awareness and trust in organic food, strengthen their willingness to pay a premium, and thereby promote the healthy expansion of the organic food industry has become a critical issue of shared concern among government departments, production enterprises, and academia. This study centers on consumer behavior, aiming to construct a framework for the formation mechanism of willingness to pay a premium for organic food. It focuses on exploring how the functional attributes of organic food influence consumers' willingness to pay a premium through their psychological cognition and behavioral mechanisms. Building upon general principles of consumer behavior, this study integrates signaling theory and ABC theory to comprehensively analyze consumers' perception, evaluation, and decision-making processes regarding organic food. It seeks to reveal the logic behind consumers' willingness to pay a premium, constructing an analytical framework that integrates product characteristics, value signals, and psychological mechanisms. This approach aims to deepen understanding of organic food consumption behavior, thereby promoting the coordinated development of sustainable consumption and the green economy.

## 2. Literature Review

As the core participants in the organic food market, consumers' willingness to pay a premium is influenced by multiple factors, including individual demand characteristics, cognitive levels, and market supply conditions. This study focuses on the consumer perspective, analyzing characteristics such as safety demands, value perceptions, consumption attitudes, and product evaluations during the selection process of organic foods. It further explores how these factors shape consumers' expectations regarding organic foods and motivate their willingness to pay a premium.



**Figure 2.**  
Consumer Behavior in the Organic Food Market.

### 2.1. Consumer Demand for Food Quality and Safety

In recent years, multiple major food safety incidents have heightened consumers' perception of food safety risks and amplified their concerns. This anxiety has not only influenced purchasing decisions but also eroded trust in food safety and the national food safety assurance system [5]. Against this backdrop, consumers have gradually adjusted how they evaluate food quality, with a significantly increased demand for food safety and quality information, particularly focusing on intangible attributes such as production environments, processing techniques, ingredient sourcing, and certification systems [6]. In the complex food market, products bearing authoritative certifications or labels gain consumer recognition more readily. This tendency is particularly pronounced in the organic food sector, where consumers favor products with official certifications, endorsements from reputable brands, transparent production processes, and comprehensive packaging information [7]. These factors not only bolster consumer trust in food quality but also heighten their willingness to pay a premium for safe, healthy, and high-quality food. Food quality labels have become a key basis for consumers to assess food safety, yet their effectiveness hinges on the accuracy and clarity of information, as well as the authority and credibility of certifying bodies [8].

Consequently, consumers expect labels to be straightforward and easily understood, while certification and dissemination should be conducted by independent, reliable institutions to ensure information authenticity and traceability. With heightened food safety awareness, consumers also expect production processes to incorporate robust traceability systems. This enables timely and accurate identification of risk sources and the implementation of appropriate countermeasures when food safety issues arise [9].

### 2.2. Consumer Awareness of Organic Foods

Currently, consumers' overall awareness of organic food remains relatively low, particularly regarding related technologies and production processes [10]. Research by Aschemann-Witzel and Zielke [11] indicates varying levels of understanding among different consumer groups. Most consumers desire comprehensive production information and are willing to pay a premium for more transparent and accurate data [11]. They believe authoritative labels and certifications enhance the reliability of food information, thereby strengthening trust in food safety. To further analyze consumer perceptions of organic food and differences among various groups, Thøgersen [12] conducted a survey of consumers across multiple European countries. Results indicate that, compared to Nordic countries,

consumers in Southern European nations (e.g., France, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, and Spain) demonstrate higher awareness of organic food, treating it as a key criterion for purchasing decisions and gauging trustworthiness [12]. However, in Norway, respondents showed lower recognition of national food quality and origin labels, relying more heavily on commercial brands, with only a minority familiar with traditional labels or regionally specific foods [13]. In Germany, organic food labels exert relatively minor influence on purchasing decisions [14]. Furthermore, consumers in France, Italy, Malta, Spain, and Hungary generally associate organic food closely with food safety [15]; whereas in Greece and Lithuania, consumers tend to link it more with food quality [16]. In Poland, organic food is more frequently perceived as part of product quality management and food recall mechanisms [17].

Overall, consumers across different countries and regions exhibit significant variations in their level of organic food awareness, key concerns, and trust foundations. These differences are markedly influenced by cultural contexts, market environments, and policy regulations.

### *2.3. Consumer Attitudes Toward Organic Foods*

Food quality and safety are key criteria for consumers when evaluating food products, directly influencing their purchasing decisions and consumption behavior [18]. Organic food is not only closely associated with food safety but has also established a strong connection with food quality in consumers' minds [19, 20]. Consequently, consumers generally perceive organic food as representing higher production standards, fewer chemical additives, and more sustainable agricultural practices. However, research indicates that while organic food provides a certain level of safety assurance, it does not directly enhance overall food quality and safety on its own. Its primary function is to convey relevant information through certification systems [21]. Given persistent information asymmetry in production, processing, and supply chain transparency, the “organic” label alone cannot fully alleviate consumer concerns [22]. Consequently, consumers increasingly prefer organic products accompanied by additional quality assurance measures to bolster trust in food quality and safety. A survey of Spanish consumers and retailers regarding the EU organic certification and labeling system revealed widespread recognition of its positive impact, with perceived flaws deemed relatively minor [23]. Furthermore, significant differences exist among various groups in terms of food safety awareness, healthy eating habits, lifestyle choices, organic food consumption levels and frequency, as well as socioeconomic characteristics [24].

### *2.4. Consumer Purchase Intentions for Organic Foods*

Purchase intention refers to the potential propensity to buy exhibited by consumers after evaluating a particular product or service, representing the likelihood of a future actual purchase [25]. Consumer perception is a crucial factor influencing purchase intention, shaped by multiple elements including brand image, promotional education, product certification, and personal experience [26]. In the organic food sector, consumers generally perceive such products as free from pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), while also being environmentally friendly. This perception significantly enhances their purchase intention [27]. Health benefits and environmental value are key drivers of purchase intention. For instance, Schleenbecker and Hamm [28] found that consumers' belief that organic foods reduce exposure to harmful chemicals, a health-related perception, significantly increased their willingness to pay a premium [28]. Simultaneously, consumers' environmental perceptions of organic agriculture, such as its role in reducing pollution and improving ecological environments, further solidify purchase intent [29]. Moreover, authoritative organic certifications and labels enhance consumer trust in product quality and safety, lowering perceived risks and thereby increasing purchase propensity [30]. Educational and emotional marketing also play a role in elevating consumers' perceived value, ultimately driving purchase intent and willingness to pay a premium [31].

### 2.5. Consumers' Willingness to Pay a Premium for Organic Food

Organic food carries additional costs due to its stringent production requirements, which are ultimately passed on to consumers through pricing. Consequently, research on consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food primarily focuses on methodological selection, model application, acceptable premium levels, and related influencing factors.

Regarding research methodologies, scholars predominantly employ the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) and auction experiments to measure consumers' willingness to pay a premium. The Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) is a typical stated preference assessment technique. Based on the principle of utility maximization, it directly surveys consumers' willingness to pay for specific environmental benefits or product quality improvements through hypothetical markets to evaluate their economic value [32]. Auction experiments, conversely, collect actual consumer payment data by simulating real market environments, better reflecting actual purchasing behavior but involving complex operations. In contrast, the CVM method is operationally straightforward and suitable for large-scale surveys [33].

In terms of model application, early studies predominantly employed binary regression models to analyze consumer willingness to pay additional costs [34], yet struggled to reveal payment decisions across varying premium levels. As research progressed, interval regression models gained widespread adoption for analyzing consumer willingness to pay at different price points. For instance, Rickersten et al. [35] employed regression models to examine U.S. and Norwegian consumers' willingness to pay extra for genetically modified vegetable oils and salmon, utilizing interval regression to assess payment willingness across different premium intervals [35]. Compared to traditional binary regression, interval regression more comprehensively reflects the distribution of willingness-to-pay, making it a mainstream tool. In recent years, researchers have also employed ordinal regression models [36], Heckman two-stage models [37], and structural equation models [38] to systematically analyze the formation mechanisms of consumer purchase intentions.

In studies of acceptable premium levels, researchers typically employ market-price-based experimental designs. By setting different premium options, they guide consumers to make choices based on comparisons with conventional food prices. For instance, Zhang et al. [39] established premium intervals (5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, and above) for organic beef products in a beef market study to measure willingness to pay and price sensitivity Zhang et al. [39]. Higuchi et al. [40] combined product-specific quality information with multiple premium tiers in their study of organic cereal breakfast products [40]. This tiered pricing strategy not only facilitates the precise assessment of acceptance levels across different premiums but also enables the analysis of key factors influencing willingness to pay.

In studies examining consumer characteristics, perceptions of food safety, understanding of the organic food system, and individual socioeconomic background are core variables. Research indicates that consumers with strong food safety awareness and deep knowledge of organic production processes and certification systems are more willing to pay a premium [41]. Higher-income and higher-education groups also show a greater preference for organic food, while consumers with children in their households exhibit a higher willingness to pay premiums due to heightened food safety concerns [42]. Additionally, consumer perceptions of organic labels, trust in certification systems, and factors such as gender, occupation, and age all influence premium payment decisions [43]. Price sensitivity, confidence in food safety, role as primary household purchaser, income level, and attention to safety information are equally significant variables [44]. Although most consumers express willingness to pay extra for organic food, actual payment levels vary significantly. The proportion of consumers genuinely willing to pay more than 10% above conventional food prices remains low [45], indicating that willingness to pay is constrained not only by perceptions of food safety and economic capacity but also by multiple factors, including price acceptance, market supply, and policy incentives.

### 2.6. Consumer Perceptions and Expectations of Organic Foods

The organic food system encompasses multiple aspects, including labeling, product information, and information inquiry methods. Researchers primarily focus on consumers' perceptions of organic food labels, their information needs, and preferences for inquiry methods. Teng and Wang [46] found that consumers generally believe effective labels should possess authority, clarity, and credibility to enhance confidence in product quality and increase purchase satisfaction [46]. Additionally, consumers' demand for food information varies by product type [47]. While highly concerned about organic food quality and safety, they do not desire organic labels to entirely replace conventional ones. Jaeger and Weber [48] found that most consumers prefer concise core information, such as production methods, ingredient sources, and quality standards, over complex data [48]. Thus, information presentation becomes crucial: intuitive, easily understandable expressions help consumers quickly access needed information and improve decision-making efficiency. Regarding information retrieval methods, consumers exhibit a conservative attitude toward telephone or online inquiries, preferring to obtain necessary information directly from product packaging to reduce inquiry costs and inconvenience [49]. This indicates that clear labeling and a comprehensive information display system are crucial for enhancing consumer trust. Simultaneously, consumers desire transparent information at reasonable costs and are unwilling to pay additional fees for information verification [50]. Further research reveals that the credibility of information providers directly influences purchasing decisions. Consumers place greater trust in authoritative information from independent institutions, government agencies, or food safety testing organizations than in information provided by manufacturers themselves [51].

Consequently, establishing a robust third-party certification system and strengthening government oversight are vital for boosting consumer confidence, regulating market order, and promoting the healthy development of the organic food industry.

## 3. Theoretical Mechanism

### 3.1. Formation Mechanisms and Influencing Factors of Consumer Behavior

#### 3.1.1. Consumers and Consumer Behavior

In a narrow sense, consumers refer to individuals or households that purchase and use various consumer goods or services; broadly speaking, they encompass individuals, enterprises, or organizations that purchase and utilize diverse products and services. Consumer behavior research focuses on the psychological responses, attitudinal orientations, and behavioral characteristics exhibited by individuals or groups during consumption activities [52]. Typically, consumer behavior encompasses the entire process from pre-purchase information gathering and decision formation to actual purchase and post-purchase evaluation. This series of behaviors is influenced by multiple factors, including individual psychology, social environment, and market supply and demand [53]. Consumer behavior can be divided into two levels: the purchase decision process and actual consumption behavior. The purchase decision is particularly critical, involving stages such as need recognition, information search, alternative comparison, purchase selection, and post-purchase reflection. Since purchase decisions directly determine final consumption outcomes, related research often focuses on this stage to reveal the mechanisms of key factors in the decision-making process and their pathways of influence on purchase intent.

#### 3.1.2. The Consumer Purchase Decision Process

Consumer purchase decisions typically progress through five stages.

The first is need recognition, where consumers become aware of the necessity for a particular product or service due to the combined influence of internal and external factors. This need may stem from internal drivers such as physiological requirements or lifestyle preferences, or be influenced by external stimuli like advertising campaigns and social environments [53]. When consumers clearly identify their needs and the means to satisfy them, the motivation for purchase behavior is activated. Due to individual characteristics and psychological differences, consumers in identical situations may

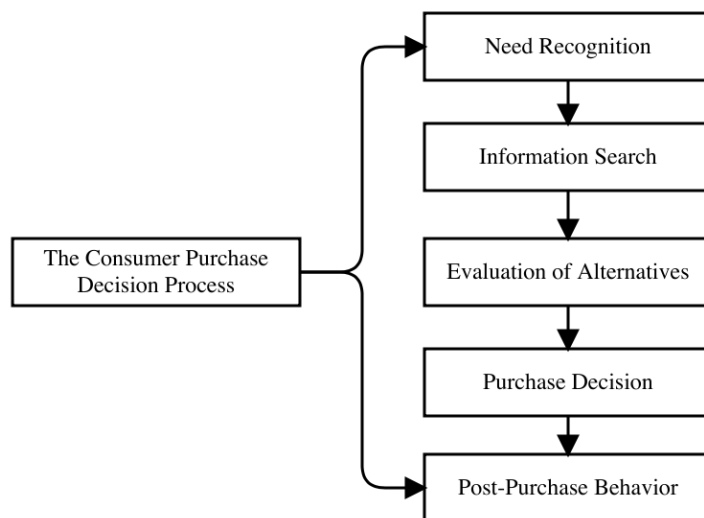
exhibit distinct psychological responses and demand expressions, leading to diverse consumption tendencies and choices [54].

The second stage involves information search. After confirming their needs, consumers actively or passively gather product-related information to support their decision-making. Information sources include personal experience, commercial promotions, opinions from social circles, media reviews, and social media content [55–60]. For inexperienced consumers, external information is particularly crucial as it effectively reduces decision-making risks.

The third stage involves a comparative evaluation, where consumers weigh different products based on existing information, considering criteria such as price, functionality, appearance, brand, and after-sales service to determine if they meet their needs [61]. The depth and accuracy of this evaluation often depend on the consumer's knowledge level and cognitive abilities.

Subsequently, the purchase decision stage begins, where consumers synthesize various information to form purchase intent and further decide on the brand, quantity, channel, and payment method [62]. However, purchase intent does not necessarily translate immediately into actual purchase behavior. Factors such as information asymmetry, risk perception, others' opinions, and external environments may cause consumers to delay, adjust, or even abandon their purchase plans [63, 64].

Finally, post-purchase behavior occurs when consumers evaluate products based on actual usage experiences. Feedback at this stage not only influences satisfaction and future purchase intent but can significantly impact brand image and market reputation [65, 66]. When product performance meets expectations, consumers tend to repurchase and actively recommend; conversely, dissatisfaction may lead to returns, negative reviews, or even complaints.



**Figure 3.**  
The Consumer Purchase Decision Process.

### 3.1.3. Influencing Factors of Consumer Behavior

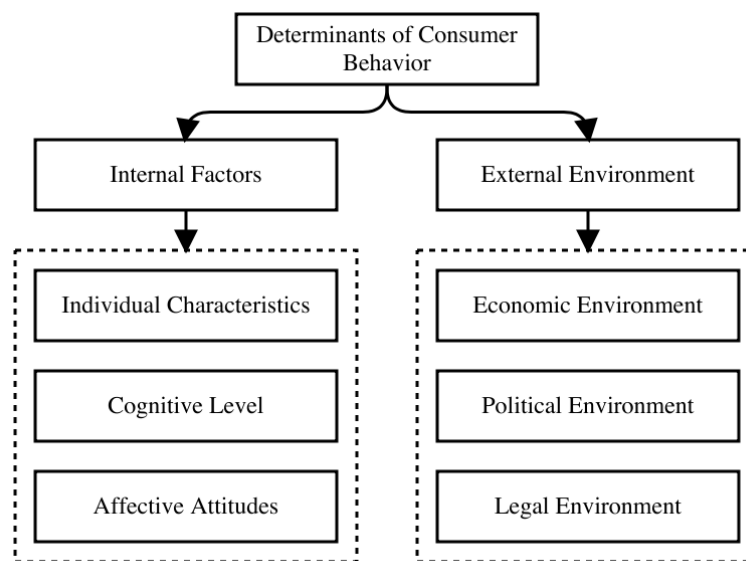
Consumer purchasing decisions are often the result of multiple factors acting in concert. According to social psychologist Lewin [67] behavioral model, individual consumer behavior is influenced by both internal factors (such as personal characteristics, cognition, and emotions) and external environments (such as economic, social, and policy factors) [67].

Regarding individual characteristics, differences in age, gender, income, education level, and family structure often lead to distinct consumer psychology and preference patterns. Age-related physiological changes and accumulated social experience influence their focus on values like health and safety. Gender

differences manifest in purchasing motivations and decision-making approaches; men tend to prioritize product functionality and practicality, while women place greater emphasis on price, sensory appeal, and household factors [68, 69]. Income levels directly determine purchasing power and the proportion of disposable income allocated to consumption. Educational attainment influences consumers' understanding of organic food concepts and their risk assessments. Different stages of the family life cycle also shift consumption priorities [70-72]. Cognitive level serves as a crucial psychological foundation for forming purchase intent. Consumers evaluate the safety and value of organic food through processes of perception, comprehension, and assessment [73, 74].

In the food market, information asymmetry makes consumers' risk perception particularly critical—when consumers harbor doubts about food safety or label authenticity, their willingness to pay a premium significantly declines [75, 76]. Therefore, clear information communication and transparent quality certification are key to enhancing consumer trust. Emotional attitudes reflect consumers' overall evaluation and emotional inclination toward organic food. Positive emotional experiences (such as feelings of safety, trust, and health benefits) often strengthen purchase intent, while negative emotions weaken consumption decisions [77, 78]. In brand communication and consumer experience design, enterprises should focus on emotional connections and value resonance to enhance consumers' psychological identification.

Beyond internal factors, the external environment profoundly influences consumer choices. Macroeconomic conditions, including income levels, pricing structures, and market competition, determine organic food's accessibility and acceptance. Government price regulation, corporate marketing strategies, and media advertising collectively shape consumers' value perceptions and purchase expectations [79-81]. The political environment guides the public toward sustainable consumption through policy direction, fiscal subsidies, tax incentives, and public education, thereby promoting green industry development [82]. Concurrently, the legal framework provides norms and safeguards for market operations. By establishing safety standards, regulatory mechanisms, and penalty systems, governments can effectively prevent false advertising and unfair competition, safeguarding consumer rights [73, 83].



**Figure 4.**  
Determinants of Consumer Behavior.



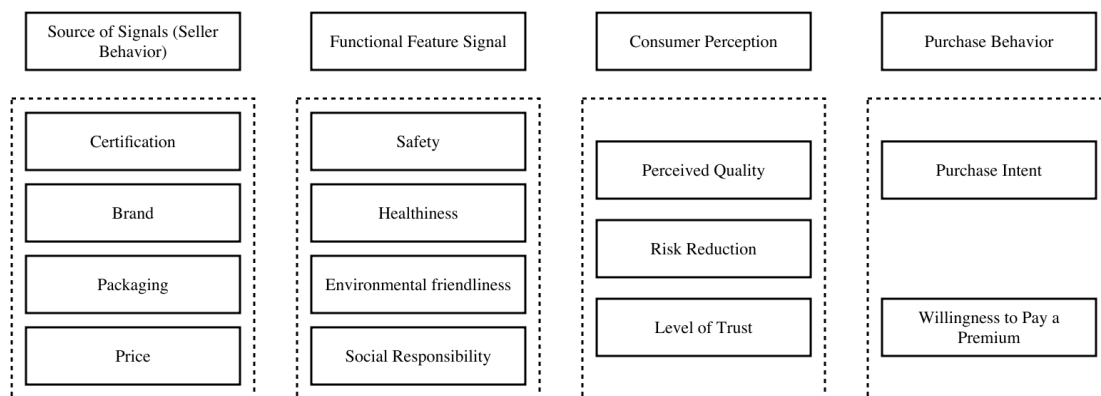
### 3.1.4. General Principles of Consumer Behavior

Based on fundamental theories of consumer behavior, its general principles can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Consumers develop needs and form perceptions in response to internal physiological urges or external environmental stimuli. When consumers recognize that a product can satisfy their needs and meet their expectations, they may proceed to purchase it.
- (2) Due to inherent risks in the purchasing process, consumers typically take measures to mitigate perceived high risks, such as conducting thorough information gathering before buying.
- (3) During product exposure and understanding, consumers gradually form attitudes toward the product, which significantly influence their purchase intent.
- (4) Before final purchase, consumers often compare and evaluate products across multiple dimensions such as quality, price, and brand based on personal needs and perceptions to support their decision. After weighing options, consumers make final choices driven by their attitudes and purchase intent, then act upon them. However, due to limitations in cognitive abilities, perception, and information evaluation skills, consumer purchasing behavior often exhibits bounded rationality.
- (5) Purchase behavior extends beyond transaction completion. Consumers evaluate their purchasing decisions based on personal experiences, forming consumption experiences that influence future choices.
- (6) Throughout this consumer purchasing process, psychological factors such as individual characteristics, cognitive levels, and emotional attitudes interact with external factors like economic conditions, policy environments, and legal frameworks to collectively shape consumers' analysis, selection, and decision-making processes.

### 3.2. Functional Characteristics of Organic Foods Based on Signal Theory

Signaling theory originates from information economics, with its core principle being “information asymmetry,” the disparity in information held by buyers and sellers in a market, which may lead to imbalances in transactional decisions [84]. In such scenarios, sellers typically possess more comprehensive product information, while buyers have limited access to such details. This imbalance can adversely affect the fairness and efficiency of market transactions. In many transactions, buyers struggle to directly assess the true quality of goods or services, while sellers possess deeper knowledge of product characteristics, production processes, durability, and potential risks [85].



**Figure 5.**  
Functional Characteristics of Organic Foods Based on Signal Theory.

In the organic food market, brand reputation and official certification labels serve as crucial references for consumers to assess product authenticity and quality.

In developed countries, where markets are more mature, governments and industry bodies have established robust certification systems that enjoy widespread consumer recognition. Concurrently,

renowned brands have cultivated strong reputations through long-term market cultivation and high-quality products, thereby enhancing consumer trust and increasing willingness to pay a premium [86]. In contrast, developing countries' markets remain in a developmental stage. Although governments have introduced organic product certifications, inadequate market regulatory systems lead to lower consumer trust in these certifications. Simultaneously, counterfeit certifications and “pseudo-organic” practices undermine the credibility of brands and certification labels, diminishing their role as quality signals. Market promotion and consumer education are equally vital means to mitigate information asymmetry and bolster confidence [87].

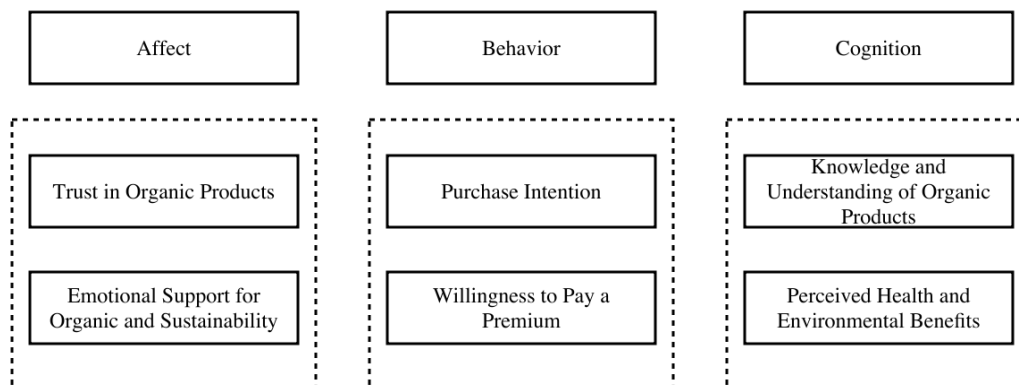
In developed countries, businesses and governments enable consumers to access reliable information through marketing campaigns, science communication, and social media promotion. For instance, companies showcase organic food cultivation processes and supply chain transparency on social platforms. Leveraging influencer endorsements and consumer experience sharing enhances information credibility, reduces uncertainty, and ultimately increases willingness to pay a premium [88]. In developing countries, however, marketing efforts remain relatively weak. Many consumers have a vague understanding of the “organic” concept, often confusing it with terms like “green food” or “pollution-free food,” resulting in limited signal transmission effectiveness.

Additionally, consumers lack sufficient understanding of organic food production methods, certification standards, and their health and environmental benefits, leading some to remain cautious about paying premiums [89]. Price signals also significantly influence consumer decisions. In developed countries, consumers generally perceive higher prices as indicative of superior quality, making them more willing to pay premiums [90]. Conversely, in developing countries, the prevalence of counterfeit and substandard products causes some consumers to question whether high prices necessarily equate to high quality, thereby affecting their willingness to pay [91]. Consumer reviews and social recognition also play vital roles in signal transmission. Developed-country consumers rely more on social media, friend recommendations, and word-of-mouth for information; positive reviews reduce purchase risks and enhance willingness to pay premiums [92]. In developing countries, despite growing social media influence, markets remain immature, consumer awareness varies widely, and information credibility is low, limiting signal transmission effectiveness [93]. Simultaneously, regional cultural differences influence how consumers interpret signals. Consumers in developed countries generally possess stronger health consciousness and environmental awareness, making them more receptive to the “health” and “environmental” signals conveyed by organic foods and willing to pay higher prices [94]. In developing countries, however, consumer perceptions of these signals remain unstable, markets are still in the cultivation phase, and some consumers exhibit low trust in organic foods, resulting in weaker overall willingness to pay a premium [95].

Therefore, the inherent characteristics of organic food can serve as a communication channel between companies and consumers. Consumers interpret the signals they receive based on their health needs, green values, environmental concerns, and price sensitivity. By integrating these signals, consumers can reinforce their organic attitudes and consumption intentions, ultimately guiding their purchasing decisions.

### 3.3. *Consumer Willingness to Pay a Premium for Organic Food Based on ABC Theory*

ABC Theory (Affect, Behavior, Cognition) emphasizes the interaction among affect, behavior, and cognition, which collectively influence consumers' purchasing decisions [96]. This theory posits that affect, behavior, and cognitive factors jointly influence consumers' choice of organic food.



**Figure 6.**  
Consumer Willingness to Pay a Premium for Organic Food Based on ABC Theory.

Affect factors refer to consumers' subjective perceptions of organic food, encompassing their identification with environmental protection and health safeguards, as well as emotional resonance. Some consumers may develop positive sentiments toward organic food due to their concern for ecological sustainability, believing it not only benefits their own health but also promotes environmental conservation. Additionally, heightened awareness of food safety and the pursuit of green lifestyles may serve as significant motivators driving their choice of organic food [97].

Behavioral factors pertain to consumer actions in actual purchasing scenarios. While some consumers may express willingness to pay higher prices in surveys, whether this willingness translates into actual purchases requires further examination. Actual buying behavior is constrained by market supply, price sensitivity, and sociocultural influences [98].

Cognitive factors involve consumers' knowledge base and attitudes toward organic food, including their understanding of its quality, health benefits, and environmental value. The channels through which consumers obtain information influence their evaluation of organic food [99]. If consumers have a vague understanding of organic food concepts or lack knowledge about its certification systems, they may adopt a cautious attitude toward purchasing. Conversely, if their cognitive level is high and they recognize the health value and eco-friendliness of organic food, their willingness to purchase may be stronger [100].

Therefore, according to ABC theory, consumers in the organic food market may exhibit significant differences in affective, behavioral, and cognitive attitudes based on factors such as health needs, green values, environmental awareness, and price sensitivity toward organic products. These differences further influence consumer purchase intentions, particularly regarding willingness to pay a premium.

### 3.4. The Logic of Theoretical Integration and Mechanism Construction

Based on the preceding analysis, the general principles of consumer behavior are as follows:

(1) Consumer behavior is a systematic process influenced by multiple factors, including purchasing decisions and their determinants.

(2) As core participants in the organic food sector, consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and willingness to pay directly impact corporate implementation enthusiasm. Appropriately bearing the additional costs of organic food helps businesses mitigate operational pressures.

(3) As the primary entities executing organic food production and sales, businesses' willingness to implement and their standards depend on balancing costs and benefits. Simultaneously, their decisions and actions also influence consumer purchasing demands.

(4) As the regulatory authority, the government must intervene through both policy and market mechanisms to address market failures and ensure the system's effective operation.

In signaling theory:

(1) The inherent characteristics of organic food serve as a communication channel between companies and consumers. Consumers interpret received information based on their health needs, green values, environmental protection concerns, and price sensitivity.

(2) Consumers can consolidate information from the organic food market to strengthen their attitudes and consumption intentions toward organic products, ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions.

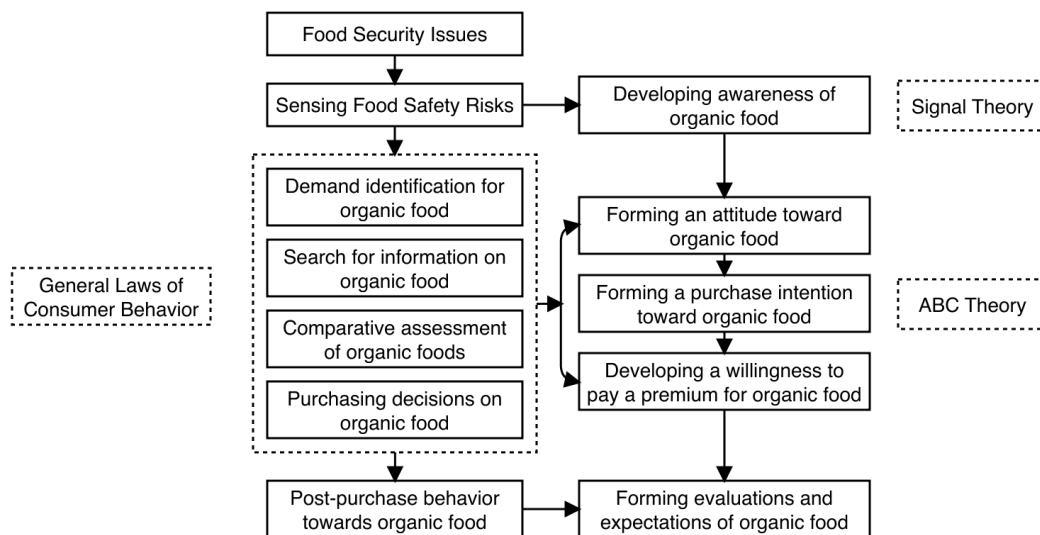
In the ABC theory:

(1) Consumers in the organic food market may exhibit significant differences in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive attitudes. These variations are primarily influenced by factors such as health needs, green values, environmental awareness, and price sensitivity toward organic products.

(2) These cognitive and attitudinal differences further influence consumers' purchase intentions, thereby affecting their willingness to pay a premium and their purchasing choices.

#### 4. Theoretical Analysis Framework

Based on the findings from the preceding analysis, this study constructs a research framework examining consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food. Grounded in an understanding of organic food and its premium pricing, this framework draws upon general principles of consumer behavior while integrating signaling theory and ABC theory. It delves into the behavioral patterns of consumers' premium payments and the influencing factors of relevant stakeholders. The framework primarily encompasses the decision-making process behind consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food and its associated determinants.



**Figure 7.**  
Theoretical Research Framework.

Due to widespread information asymmetry in the food market, consumers often face uncertainties regarding quality, nutrition, and safety when purchasing food products. With frequent food safety incidents, consumer concern over food safety risks has intensified. However, there currently lacks an effective mechanism to monitor and disseminate food quality and safety information.

Against this backdrop, consumer demand for food safety-related information continues to rise, further stimulating potential interest in and awareness of organic food. Organic food, with its relatively robust certification and regulatory systems, is viewed as an effective option for mitigating information

asymmetry and reducing food safety risks. When consumers perceive heightened food safety risks and believe organic food can meet their needs, they typically proactively seek additional relevant information to support subsequent purchasing decisions.

During this process, consumers gradually form attitudes toward organic food, which in turn influence their purchase intent and ultimately impact their purchasing decisions. Before making a final choice, consumers typically evaluate organic food against alternative products based on specific criteria to identify the option best suited to their needs. Following this comparative assessment, consumers develop clear purchase intentions and make concrete purchasing decisions, including channel selection, willingness to pay a premium, and the level of premium paid.

Furthermore, after completing the purchase, consumers evaluate their satisfaction based on the consumption experience, with this assessment directly influencing future repeat purchase behavior. It is noteworthy that, due to persistent information asymmetry within the organic food sector and limitations in consumer cognition and knowledge, purchasing decisions in this domain often exhibit characteristics of bounded rationality.

In the consumer decision-making process for purchasing organic food, individual characteristics such as gender, age, marital status, education level, occupation, and income significantly influence purchasing behavior. Simultaneously, differences in consumers' perceptions of food safety risks, as well as variations in their demand for, cognition of, attitudes toward, and purchase intentions for the organic food system, also lead to divergent purchasing behaviors. Therefore, consumer purchasing decisions are influenced by a multitude of factors. Furthermore, external economic conditions and political-legal environments exert equally significant impacts on purchasing behavior.

## 5. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

This study constructs a systematic theoretical framework elucidating the formation mechanism of consumers' willingness to pay a premium for organic food, from perceived needs to final decision. Integrating consumer behavior patterns, signaling theory, and ABC theory, the framework systematically reveals the psychological process through which consumers, when encountering organic food, progressively develop purchase intentions and premium payment decisions via demand cognition and emotional attitudes.

The theoretical contributions of this study manifest across three dimensions. First, it clarifies the psychological pathway of premium willingness formation, revealing the intrinsic logical connections between perceived cognition, emotional attitudes, and purchase intention, and elucidating how these elements synergistically drive premium payment behavior. Second, it integrates signaling theory with ABC theory to analyze consumer sensitivity and response mechanisms to product information, brand reputation, and social signals during organic food selection, demonstrating the guiding role of external information in consumer decision-making. Finally, this study broadens the perspective of organic food consumption research by integrating premium payment behavior into a systematic theoretical framework. This not only enriches the relevant theoretical system but also provides a theoretical foundation and reference pathway for subsequent research on green consumption, sustainable consumption, and environmental decision-making.

Future research may advance in the following directions: First, empirical validation of the proposed theoretical model through questionnaire surveys, experimental studies, or big data analysis to assess the robustness and universality of pathway relationships; second, the model's applicability and operational mechanisms across cultural contexts should be explored by fully accounting for differences in cultural values, food safety perceptions, and consumption habits across countries and regions; third, further attention should be given to the roles of various factors in shaping consumers' willingness to pay a premium, thereby enhancing the explanatory power and practical guidance value of the theoretical framework.

## Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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