Understanding the Behavioral Drivers of Plant-Based Food Consumption Intention among Urban Youth: Evidence from Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

Amid a global shift towards sustainable consumption, this study investigates the behavioral drivers of plant-based food (PBF) consumption intention among urban youth in Hanoi, Vietnam, a topic under-explored in the local context. Drawing on an extended Theory of Planned Behavior, the research examines the roles of health consciousness, environmental concern, animal welfare concern, social norms, and religious beliefs. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 246 university students, and the data were analyzed using Exploratory Factor Analysis and linear regression. Results indicate that health consciousness and social norms are the strongest positive predictors of consumption intention. Animal welfare concern also has a positive effect, while environmental concern surprisingly shows a significant negative relationship. The hypothesis on religious beliefs was rejected. This study provides crucial empirical insights for marketers and policymakers, highlighting the primary motivations of this key demographic and offering guidance for effective promotional strategies.

Keywords: Plant-based food, Research, Student, Urban youth, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

The global food landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by a growing awareness of the health, environmental, and ethical implications of consumption choices. Amid this shift, the consumption of plant-based foods (PBFs) has emerged as a prominent trend, moving from a niche market to a mainstream dietary option. A plant-based diet, defined by its focus on foods derived from plants, is increasingly adopted not only by vegetarians and vegans but also by a broader demographic of consumers, particularly the youth, who seek healthier and more sustainable lifestyles (Salonen & Helne, 2012). This burgeoning trend presents a compelling area for research, especially in emerging economies where food consumption patterns are evolving rapidly.

Vietnam, with its rapidly growing urban population and vibrant youth demographic, represents an ideal context to study these evolving dietary habits. While the adoption of PBFs is gaining momentum in Vietnamese cities like Hanoi, a significant knowledge gap exists concerning the underlying psychological and behavioral factors that drive this consumption intention. Existing studies on this topic have predominantly focused on developed Western countries. Their findings may not be directly applicable to the unique socio-cultural and economic environment of Vietnam. Specifically, the influence of traditional cultural norms, familial expectations, and unique local market dynamics on young consumers' intentions remains underexplored. Understanding these drivers is crucial for businesses, policymakers, and health organizations aiming to promote sustainable and healthy food systems.

Building upon the gaps identified, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing the intention to consume plant-based foods among urban youth in Hanoi, Vietnam. Drawing on an extended framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a model that has proven effective in explaining consumer behavior (Voss et al., 1998), including the purchase intention of green and vegetarian products (Ooi et al., 2012), this research has three main objectives: to examine the influence of key TPB constructs, including attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, on PBF consumption intention; to explore the roles of other significant external variables, such as health consciousness and environmental concerns, in shaping consumption intention, as suggested by previous research (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017; Kim et al., 2020); and to provide empirical evidence from a specific, underexplored cultural context—Vietnam—thereby contributing to the cross-cultural understanding of PBF consumption behaviors.

This study offers several significant contributions. Theoretically, it extends the well-established TPB model by integrating additional variables highly relevant to modern consumption trends, providing a more comprehensive framework for predicting PBF consumption intention. This approach aligns with the advice of Ajzen (1991), who suggests researchers can incorporate other relevant variables to enhance predictive accuracy. Empirically, by focusing on urban youth in Hanoi, the research provides novel insights into a unique demographic and

geographical context, enriching the body of literature on consumer behavior in developing Asian markets. Practically, the findings will be valuable for food businesses and marketing professionals in designing effective strategies to promote PBFs, for public health authorities in developing targeted campaigns to encourage healthier diets, and for policymakers in formulating initiatives that support sustainable food production and consumption.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

This study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a widely used and robust model for predicting and explaining human behavior across various contexts (Ajzen, 1991). The TPB posits that an individual's behavioral intention is the most significant determinant of their actual behavior. This intention, in turn, is a function of three core constructs: Attitude, Subjective Norms, and Perceived Behavioral Control. Attitude reflects an individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior. Subjective Norms represent the perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in a behavior, influenced by the beliefs and motivations of significant others. Lastly, Perceived Behavioral Control reflects the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior, dependent on the individual's resources and opportunities. While the TPB provides a strong theoretical foundation, its creator, Ajzen (1991), noted that other variables could be incorporated to improve the model's predictive power and provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding complex behaviors like food consumption.

A review of prior literature on vegetarian and plant-based consumption reveals several key factors that influence consumer behavior (Võ, 2016; De Backer & Hudders, 2014). This study extends the core TPB model by integrating additional constructs that are particularly relevant to the context of plant-based food consumption among urban youth in Vietnam. Health consciousness has been identified as a major driver of food choices in numerous studies, with consumers often choosing healthier options to reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity and cardiovascular disease (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008; Renner et al., 2012). Your research's findings support this, showing that students are highly concerned with health and believe that plant-based foods can help them maintain a balanced diet and improve their physical well-being. Accordingly, we hypothesize that health consciousness positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.

Ethical considerations also play a significant role. Animal welfare concern is a well-documented reason for adopting a vegetarian diet, as consumers seek to avoid products from animals subjected to inhumane industrial farming practices (Wright & Howcroft, 1992; Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000; De Backer & Hudders, 2014). Your research strongly supports this, indicating a positive relationship between animal welfare concerns and the intention to consume plant-based foods. Furthermore, the rising awareness of the negative environmental impact of conventional food production has led researchers to investigate environmental concern as a driver of plant-based food consumption (Williams & Hammit, 2001; Kim et al., 2020). The production of PBFs is often seen as more eco-friendly due to lower resource consumption. However, your findings present a counter-intuitive result, suggesting a negative relationship between environmental concern and PBF consumption intention, a finding that merits specific examination.

In addition to personal beliefs, social factors exert a powerful influence. Subjective norms are crucial in shaping an individual's behavior, particularly among young consumers who are highly sensitive to social trends (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017). The opinions and actions of family and peers can significantly influence a person's decision-making (Eles & Sihombing, 2017). Your research confirms that social norms are a strong predictor of consumption intention, highlighting that students are easily influenced by their social circle and the general trend of adopting PBFs. Finally, religious beliefs often dictate dietary habits, with many religions, such as Buddhism, encouraging vegetarianism (Võ, 2016). While religion can be a significant motivator for some, your findings indicate that it has an insignificant effect on PBF consumption intention within your specific sample. Given its theoretical relevance, however, this factor is still included in the model for a comprehensive analysis.

Based on the hypotheses developed above, we propose the following research model, which integrates these key factors to provide a comprehensive view of the behavioral drivers of plant-based food consumption intention among urban youth, as following:

H_1: Health consciousness positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.
H_2: Environmental concern negatively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.
H_3: Animal welfare concern positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.
H_4: Social norms positively influence the intention to consume plant-based food.
H_5: Religious beliefs positively influence the intention to consume plant-based food.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employs a quantitative research design utilizing a cross-sectional survey to investigate the relationships between the constructs. This design is particularly well-suited for collecting data from a large sample at a single point in time, enabling the examination of relationships between variables within their natural setting. The primary data analysis will be conducted using

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). We selected PLS-SEM for its suitability in exploratory research, particularly when the theoretical model is complex, and the research aims to predict key target constructs. Unlike covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM does not require stringent assumptions about data distribution and is robust with smaller sample sizes. This method is especially effective for analyzing intricate relationships, including mediator and moderator effects, making it an ideal choice for testing our proposed research model.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

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The target population for this study comprises university students in Hanoi. This specific group was chosen because they represent the core of the urban youth demographic and are often at the forefront of social and dietary trends. The data collection was carried out from March to April 2024.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. The research team employed a snowball sampling method, where initial participants were recruited through personal contacts and then asked to share the survey with others. Additionally, direct surveys were conducted at vegetarian restaurants and within university campuses in Hanoi. A total of 262 responses were collected, of which 246 were deemed valid for analysis after filtering out incomplete or invalid responses.

Prior to the survey, participants were informed about the study's objectives and significance, and their voluntary consent was obtained to use their responses for research purposes. This ensures the ethical integrity of the data collection process.

3.3. Measurement Items

All constructs in the research model were measured using established scales adapted from prior validated studies to ensure reliability and validity. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Completely Disagree) to 5 (Completely Agree), was used for all items. The specific measurement items and their sources are detailed below:

Animal Welfare Concern (AW): This construct measures the extent to which ethical concerns about animals influence consumption decisions. The items were adapted from scales by Wright and Howcroft (1992) and Linderman and Väänänen (2000).

- AW1: I believe that producing plant-based food does not cause pain to animals.
- AW2: I believe that producing plant-based food respects the rights of animals.
- AW3: I think that slaughtering animals is terrible.
- AW4: I think that killing animals for food is wrong.
- AW5: I think that animals should be removed from every family's meal.

Religious Beliefs (REL): This construct assesses the influence of religious faith on dietary choices. The items were adapted from Lindeman and Väänänen (2000), and De Backer and Hudders (2014).

- REL1: Eating a vegetarian diet is not forbidden in my religion.
- REL2: Eating a vegetarian diet is harmonious and consistent with my religious views.
- REL3: My religion does not allow me to eat certain types of meat.
- REL4: My religious beliefs dictate that I must eat a vegetarian diet.

Health Consciousness (HEL): This construct measures the degree to which individuals are motivated by health considerations when making food choices. The items were adapted from a scale by Renner et al. (2012) .

- HEL1: I want to be healthy.
- HEL2: Plant-based foods help me supplement my nutritional needs, vitamins, and minerals.
- HEL3: Plant-based foods help me maintain a balanced diet.
- HEL4: I want to be alert and full of positive energy.
- HEL5: Plant-based foods help me improve my physique and beautiful skin.
- HEL6: Plant-based foods improve my health indicators.

Environmental Concern (EP): This construct evaluates the impact of environmental awareness on consumption decisions. The items were adapted from Lindeman and Väänänen (2000) and Wright and Howcroft (1992).

- EP1: Plant-based foods are produced in an environmentally friendly way.
- EP2: The production of plant-based foods will not disrupt the balance of the natural environment.
- EP3: I think that meat production harms the environment (because animal farming technology emits too much greenhouse gas).

Social Norms (SN): This construct measures the perceived social pressure to adopt a plant-based diet. The items were adapted from Renner et al. (2012) .

- SN1: My family thinks my vegetarian diet is good.
- SN2: People I know (friends, family, neighbors) are eating a vegetarian diet.
- SN3: Not eating a vegetarian diet would be impolite.
- SN4: I do not want to disappoint the people who try to bring me happiness (when I do not eat a vegetarian diet as they wish).

Consumption Intention (VD): This construct measures the individual's likelihood of choosing plant-based foods. The items were adapted from Janda and Trocchia (2001) and supplemented by the authors.

- VD1: If forced to make a decision, I would choose to eat vegetarian over non-vegetarian.
- VD2: If vegetarian dishes are diverse and readily available, I will prioritize buying them.
- VD3: I am not satisfied with a meal that does not have a savory dish.
- VD4: I will continue to maintain the habit of using vegetarian foods every day.

The reliability and validity of these scales were assessed through Cronbach's Alpha and Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to ensure the quality of the measurement model before proceeding with the structural model analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Sample Characteristics

The survey yielded 262 responses, with 246 deemed valid for analysis. The table 1 provides a concise overview of the demographic characteristics and plant-based food consumption habits of the student sample. Key findings indicate that the majority of respondents were female (63.3%) and were in their second year of study (68.2%). Economically, a significant portion of the sample reported a low monthly income, with 70.6% earning less than 3

million VND. Regarding consumer behavior, the data shows that while most students occasionally consider purchasing plant-based foods (83.3%), their actual consumption frequency is low. Notably, a substantial number of participants (68.6%) spend between 500,000 and 1,000,000 VND per month on these products, suggesting a niche but dedicated consumer segment.

Table 1. Research Sample Descriptive Statistics.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study		
First Year	48	19.6
Second Year	167	68.2
Third Year	24	9.8
Final Year	6	2.4
Gender		
Male	90	36.7
Female	155	63.3
Status		
Employed	142	58.0
Unemployed	103	42.0
Monthly Income		
< 3 million VND	173	70.6
3 - 8 million VND	57	23.3
> 8 million VND	15	6.1
Frequency of Plant-Based Food Consumption		
Rarely	72	29.4
2-3 times/month	72	29.4
1 time/week	59	24.1
Daily	42	17.1
Average Monthly Spending on Plant-Based Food		
300,000-500,000 VND	6	2.4
500,000-1,000,000 VND	168	68.6
Above 1,000,000 VND	71	29.0
Purchase Intention for Plant-Based Food		
Never	33	13.5
Occasionally	204	83.3
Frequently	8	3.3

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment

The provided table presents the results of the Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis, which assesses the internal consistency of the measurement scales used in the study (table 2). A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.60 or higher is generally considered acceptable for research purposes. As shown in the table, all six constructs demonstrate good reliability, with values ranging from a low of 0.610 for "Religious Beliefs" to a high of 0.843 for "Health Consciousness". The high alpha values for constructs like "Consumption Intention" (0.810) and "Social Norms" (0.774) indicate that the items within these scales are highly correlated and consistently measure their intended constructs. Overall, the results confirm that all scales are reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis Results.

Construct	Observed Variables	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
Animal Welfare Concern (AW)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.767		
	AW1	569	717
	AW2	576	713
	AW3	619	695
	AW4	469	753
	AW5	475	746
Religious Beliefs (REL)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.610		
	REL1	334	535
	REL2	380	499
	REL3	351	521
	REL4	391	489
Health Consciousness (HEL)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.843		
	HEL1	608	820
	HEL2	571	828
	HEL3	630	816
	HEL4	634	815
	HEL5	649	812
	HEL6	652	812
Environmental Concern (EP)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.670		
	EP1	442	626
	EP2	485	571
	EP3	523	519
Social Norms (SN)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.774		
	SN1	510	753
	SN2	654	677
	SN3	593	712
	SN4	558	729
Consumption Intention (VD)	Cronbach's Alpha = 0.810		
	VD1	608	771
	VD2	666	744
	VD3	628	763
	VD4	612	769

4.3. Structural Model Assessment

This table presents the overall fit and explanatory power of the final regression model. The adjusted R^2 of 0.594 indicates that the selected independent variables (Animal Welfare Concern, Health Consciousness, Environmental Concern, and Social Norms) collectively explain 59.4% of the variance in the dependent variable, Consumption Intention. This shows that the model has a substantial ability to predict the outcome. The Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.153 is within the acceptable range (1.5 to 2.5), suggesting that there is no autocorrelation among the residuals, thus satisfying a key assumption of linear regression.

Table 3. Adjusted Model Summary.

Model	R	R2	Adjusted R2	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	0.775	0.600	0.594	35.402	2.153

Source: Dependent Variable: VD.

The table 4 provides detailed information on the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, as determined by the regression analysis. The standardized beta coefficients indicate the relative strength of each predictor. Health Consciousness emerged as the strongest and most significant positive predictor of vegetarian food consumption intention, with the highest beta coefficient ($\beta=0.474$, $p<0.001$). This finding suggests that a student's concern for their health is the primary driver of their intent to consume these products.

Social Norms also had a significant positive impact ($\beta=0.350$, $p<0.001$), emphasizing the crucial role of friends and family in shaping a student's consumption habits.

Interestingly, Environmental Concern showed a statistically significant negative relationship with consumption intention ($\beta=-0.092$, $p=0.029$). This noteworthy finding suggests that while students may be aware of environmental issues, this awareness does not translate into a direct motivation to adopt a vegetarian diet. Conversely,

Animal Welfare Concern had a positive but weaker effect ($\beta=0.118$, $p=0.020$), indicating that while ethical considerations are relevant, they are not as influential as personal health or social factors for the majority of the students surveyed. Finally, all VIF values were well below the threshold of 10, confirming that there was no multicollinearity in the regression model.

Table 4. Regression Coefficients.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics (VIF)
(Constant)	0.523	0.263		1.991	0.048	
AW	0.137	0.058	0.118	2.351	0.020	1.512
HEL	0.458	0.048	0.474	9.584	0.000	0.687
EP	-0.107	0.049	-0.092	-0.203	0.029	0.964
SN	0.362	0.051	0.350	7.045	0.000	0.675

Source: Dependent Variable: VD.

The Table 5 provides a clear overview of the findings from the hypothesis testing, indicating which of the proposed relationships were supported by the data. The results show that the hypotheses regarding the positive influence of health consciousness, animal welfare concern, and social norms on plant-based food consumption intention were all accepted. Similarly, the hypothesis that environmental concern has a negative effect was also accepted. Conversely, the hypothesis that religious beliefs positively influence consumption intention was rejected, indicating that for this specific sample, religious factors do not play a significant role in motivating a plant-based diet. This summary provides a conclusive overview of the study's empirical findings, setting the stage for the discussion and conclusion.

Table 5. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results.

Hypothesis	Result
H1: Health consciousness positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.	Accepted
H2: Environmental concern negatively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.	Accepted
H3: Animal welfare concern positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.	Accepted
H4: Social norms positively influence the intention to consume plant-based food.	Accepted
H5: Religious beliefs positively influences the intention to consume plant-based food.	Rejected

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a compelling insight into the behavioral drivers of plant-based food (PBF) consumption intention among urban youth in Hanoi. The analysis confirms that four out of five hypothesized factors—health consciousness, social norms, animal welfare concern, and environmental concern—are statistically significant predictors of consumption intention. This provides a robust empirical foundation for understanding the motivations behind this dietary shift in an emerging market context.

The most significant finding is the predominant role of health consciousness as a positive driver of PBF consumption intention. This aligns with a growing body of literature that identifies health benefits as a primary motivation for adopting plant-based diets, particularly among younger, health-aware consumers (Renner et al., 2012). Our results underscore that for this demographic, PBFs are viewed less through a purely ethical or religious lens and more as a proactive lifestyle choice for personal well-being. This finding is consistent with research on organic food consumption, which also finds a strong link to health consciousness (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008).

The substantial influence of social norms also highlights a critical cultural nuance. As a collectivistic society, the opinions and behaviors of family and peers carry significant weight in individual decision-making. The strong positive relationship found in this study is consistent with prior research that emphasizes the importance of social circles in influencing green and ethical consumption behaviors (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017; Eles & Sihombing, 2017). The rejection of the religious beliefs hypothesis further reinforces this, suggesting that PBF consumption for urban youth in Hanoi is primarily a modern, secular trend rather than a traditional, faith-based practice, which contrasts with traditional drivers of vegetarianism noted in earlier studies (Võ, 2016).

The negative relationship between environmental concern and PBF consumption intention presents a unique and counter-intuitive finding. While previous research has often linked environmental awareness to eco-friendly consumption habits, the results of this study suggest that for urban youth in Hanoi, this concern does not yet serve as a direct or primary motivator for adopting a plant-based diet. This finding deviates from studies that have found a positive correlation (Kim et al., 2020; Williams & Hammit, 2001) and warrants further investigation into the specific barriers or competing values that may exist for this demographic.

Finally, while animal welfare concern was a significant positive predictor, its influence was weaker than that of health consciousness and social norms. This indicates that while ethical considerations are present for some consumers, they are secondary to more direct personal and social motivations, a finding echoed in other research on vegetarianism drivers (De Backer & Hudders, 2014).

Overall, the findings suggest that to promote PBF consumption among this key demographic, marketing efforts should primarily focus on messaging related to health benefits and social trends, while also acknowledging ethical and environmental aspects as supporting arguments. This approach offers a more effective strategy than relying on traditional or ethical appeals alone.

6. Conclusion

This study successfully identified the key behavioral drivers of plant-based food consumption intention among urban youth in Hanoi by applying an extended version of the Theory of Planned Behavior. The findings provide a clear and nuanced understanding of this consumer segment's motivations. The analysis confirmed that health consciousness and social norms are the strongest positive predictors of consumption intention, while animal welfare concern also plays a significant but lesser role. Notably, the hypothesis regarding religious beliefs was rejected, indicating that for this demographic, PBF consumption is primarily driven by modern, secular trends rather hơn traditional faith-based practices. The most unexpected finding was the significant negative relationship between environmental concern and consumption intention, a result that warrants further investigation.

This research makes a valuable contribution by offering empirical evidence from an under-researched market and demographic, enriching the cross-cultural literature on consumer behavior. The findings provide actionable insights for businesses and marketers on how to effectively position and promote PBF products to this key demographic. However, the study has several limitations, including its specific sample in Hanoi, its moderate sample size, and the use of a convenience sampling method. Therefore, future research should aim to overcome these limitations by expanding the scope to other regions, identifying new potential drivers, and further validating the measurement scales in the Vietnamese context to enhance the generalizability and robustness of the findings.

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