

Model Building for Green Food Purchase Intentions: The Role of Cultural and Behavioral Factors

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ABSTRACT

Amid increasing global and national concerns about food safety, green food has become a viable solution for encouraging healthier and more responsible eating habits. This research seeks to examine the behavioral and cultural factors affecting the intention to buy green food. Data was gathered from 30 in-depth interviews with typical consumers in Vietnam. The data analyzed using NVivo 11 software identified three primary groups of influencing factors: (1) motivators like health consciousness, food safety concerns, perceived quality, and environmental concerns; (2) barriers such as high prices, limited accessibility, and authenticity worries; and (3) cultural factors including future orientation, collectivism, and man-nature orientation, all affecting the intention to purchase green food. Building upon these findings, the study proposes the extension of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model to incorporate cultural factors, thereby providing both a theoretical and practical foundation for developing a quantitative research framework in the subsequent phase.

Keywords: Cultural factors, green food, purchase intention, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global concerns about food quality and safety have increased. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) reports that roughly 600 million people, or about one-tenth of the world's population, become ill annually due to unsafe food. Of these cases, around 420,000 deaths are recorded each year, leading to an estimated economic impact of USD 110 billion. Notably, 40% of those affected are children under five (WHO, 2024). These urgent concerns led the United Nations (2015) to establish Target 3.9 in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which aims to: "By 2030, significantly decrease the number of deaths and illnesses caused by hazardous chemicals and pollution of air, water, and soil. In this context, green food is increasingly recognized as a sustainable alternative that benefits human health while mitigating environmental and ecological impacts. It encompasses food that is safe, nutritious, and of high quality, produced in accordance with principles of sustainable development that balance economic, social, and environmental considerations (Rezai, 2012; Leong & Mariadass, 2019; Liu, 2003; Qi & Ploeger, 2019; Woo & Kim, 2019). The transition to environmentally sustainable food consumption not only promotes the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), but also corresponds with other objectives such as SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) (United Nations, 2015).

Food safety and hygiene have likewise emerged as a pressing concern in Vietnam. Despite substantial efforts by the government and relevant authorities to enhance oversight of the food safety chain, most notably through the issuance of Decision No. 20/QD-TTg (2012) by the Prime Minister, which approved the National Strategy on Food Safety with a vision extending to 2030, unsafe, low-quality, and untraceable food products persist in the marketplace. Confronted with concerns regarding food safety and driven by the objective of safeguarding both

public health and the environment, individual consumers and households are progressively inclined to select clean, naturally sourced food (Molinillo et al., 2020). Green food has emerged as a suitable alternative to address food safety issues and mitigate environmental impacts. It can be classified into two categories: the first permits limited use of chemicals, while the second pertains to organic food (Rezai, 2012). Generally, statistical data concerning green food is relatively limited in comparison to that pertaining to organic food. The global market for organic food experienced a fivefold increase between 2000 and 2018 (Willer et al., 2020), with demand primarily focused in North America and Europe, which together constitute approximately 90% of worldwide sales. Conversely, demand in other regions, including Vietnam, remains comparatively low (Willer & Lernoud, 2018). Nevertheless, Vietnamese consumers are increasingly prioritizing environmentally friendly and high-quality food for their daily nutrition due to considerations of safety, nutritional benefits, and superior taste. However, this interest frequently does not translate into tangible purchasing actions (Aitken et al., 2020). Overall, the green food market in Vietnam, including the organic segment, remains modest in scale but possesses considerable potential for future growth. This prompts important inquiries: What determinants motivate consumers to purchase green food? Conversely, what obstacles hinder the transformation of interest into concrete purchasing intentions and behaviors?

Consumer behavior and behavioral intention towards green food are affected by a range of factors, with culture playing a notably significant role (Matharu et al., 2024). Examining the influence of culture on consumer behavior is particularly important and warrants careful consideration by enterprises in the development and delivery of products to consumers, especially green products (Ghazali et al., 2017). According to Hofstede (2011), culture is the fundamental basis of human conduct. It manifests at three levels: national culture, group culture, and individual culture (Hofstede, 1993). Of these, individual culture exerts both direct and indirect influences on consumer purchasing behavior. The majority of prior research has concentrated on investigating the impact of individual cultural factors on consumer attitudes toward green products or green consumption in general (Duong & Vu, 2022; Ghazali et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2016; Sheng et al., 2019; Sreen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these investigations have not adequately explored the influence of individual cultural values on shaping consumer behavior towards environmentally friendly products, particularly within the Vietnamese market and across its diverse regional contexts. Consequently, the second research inquiry of this study is: What role does individual culture play in forming and transforming behavioral intentions regarding green food consumption in Vietnam? This research endeavors to examine both cultural and behavioral determinants affecting green food purchase intentions in Vietnam through comprehensive interviews with representative consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Green Food

The concept of green food is subject to diverse interpretations but predominantly underscores safety, nutrition, and sustainability. Liu (2003) and Chao and Uhagile (2022) emphasize that green food promotes ecological sustainability while harmonizing environmental, social, and economic considerations. Rezai (2012) incorporates aspects such as animal welfare and health, categorizing green food into two types: one permitting limited chemical use, and another comparable to organic food with more stringent standards. This classification aligns with Qi and Ploeger (2019), who distinguish between Class A (limited chemical use) and Class AA (organic-equivalent) green food in China. Woo and Kim (2019) connect green food to decreased use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, feed additives, and genetic engineering. Leong and Mariadass (2019) describe it as safe, nutritious, and ethically produced. In contrast, Leggett (2020) states that green food may or may not be officially certified organic, as long as it reflects environmentally responsible practices. Generally, green food includes products that are safe to eat, healthy, and sustainably produced. This category ranges from foods with minimal chemical input to fully organic options, focusing on ecological balance as well as human and animal welfare.

The Role of Behavior Factors in Green Food Purchase Intention

Behavioral factors are pivotal in comprehending consumers' intentions to purchase environmentally friendly food, with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) constituting a broadly utilized model (Nguyen et al., 2017; Sreen et al., 2018). TPB delineates three primary determinants: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

- Attitudes represent how people view green food, whether positively or negatively, often based on their beliefs about its health, safety, and environmental advantages. Sreen et al. (2018) argue that having a positive attitude increases the likelihood of buying green products.
- Subjective norms, which encompass the perceived expectations of significant others, such as family, friends, and society, play a crucial role in shaping behavior. It is particularly true in collectivist cultures, such as

Vietnam, where social approval has a significant influence on personal choices. Duong and Vu (2022) indicate that subjective norms not only directly affect intention but also enhance positive attitudes and perceived control.

- Perceived behavioral control reflects how easy or difficult consumers perceive it to be to obtain green food, considering factors such as availability, affordability, and accessibility. Higher perceived behavioral control levels are correlated with stronger intentions to buy and actual purchase behavior. In Vietnam, perceived behavioral control has been shown to have a significant direct impact on green food purchasing, thereby filling a previous research gap (Duong & Vu, 2022).

Beyond the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), other behavioral factors have been identified. Environmental knowledge and ecological awareness can enhance purchase intentions (Nguyen & Uong, 2025; Sheng et al., 2019; Tanner & Kast, 2003; Wang, 2014). Additionally, lifestyle traits such as values, interests, and routines influence environmentally conscious actions (Nguyen et al., 2016; Sheng et al., 2019). Certain lifestyles, including “adventurous” and “manufacturer-oriented” profiles among Hanoi youth, have been shown to have positive correlations with green food intention (Nguyen et al., 2016). Additionally, both interdependent and independent self-construals can indirectly foster green purchasing by shaping attitudes (Nguyen et al., 2016).

In conclusion, the intention to purchase green food arises from the interaction of factors grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as well as broader behavioral determinants. These relationships may fluctuate depending on contextual factors such as product accessibility and cultural norms.

The Role of Cultural Factors in Green Food Purchase Intention

Cultural values have a significant influence on consumer attitudes and intentions regarding green food. In particular, collectivism, a value that emphasizes group harmony and shared responsibility, has been found to positively impact green purchase attitudes and intentions, primarily through social norms and reference group effects (Chan, 2001; Nguyen et al., 2017). In Vietnam, collectivist values are linked to stronger environmental attitudes and a greater sense of perceived behavioral control. However, some evidence suggests that these values do not always translate into actual purchasing actions, highlighting an intention-behavior gap in collectivist settings (Duong & Vu, 2022).

Another significant cultural dimension is long-term orientation (LTO), which encapsulates a future-oriented perspective emphasizing perseverance, frugality, and consideration for long-term outcomes. Individuals exhibiting high LTO are more inclined to participate in sustainable consumption practices, including the purchase of environmentally friendly food products, owing to their consciousness of future ecological implications (Duong & Vu, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2017; Sheng et al., 2019; Sreen et al., 2018). Within the Vietnamese context, LTO has been demonstrated to positively impact attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and both intentions and behaviors related to green consumption.

Man-nature orientation is acknowledged as an important cultural aspect (Chan, 2001; Sreen et al., 2018). In India, Sreen et al. (2018) suggested that religious traditions like nature worship in Hinduism may encourage Indian consumers to strongly believe in living in harmony with nature. Their study confirmed that man-nature orientation significantly impacts attitudes toward green products and purchase intent. This shows that people who prioritize ecological harmony are more likely to engage in environmentally sustainable consumption.

While many studies have quantitatively investigated green food consumption (Duong & Vu, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2016), there is still a shortage of qualitative research on how consumers perceive and experience green food in everyday life. Cultural values such as collectivism, long-term orientation, and man–nature orientation are known to affect the intention to buy environmentally friendly products. However, how these values influence actual decision-making is not yet fully understood. A qualitative research method is necessary to better understand consumer motivations, contextual influences, and the importance placed on green consumption, particularly in culturally complex environments like Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses in-depth interviews with typical food consumers to explore the factors influencing green food purchase intentions, focusing specifically on the role of individual culture. These interviews allow participants to naturally express their thoughts, experiences, and consumption behaviors in a detailed and authentic way, making them well-suited for exploring personal and cultural topics (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). The principal target demographic of this study comprises women, as they are predominantly the key decision-makers in household food acquisitions (Stangherlin & de Barcellos, 2018). Participants were intentionally selected to ensure a diverse representation based on age, income level, and locality, encompassing both urban and rural settings, thereby offering a wide and representative spectrum of viewpoints (refer to Table 1).

Table 1: Sample characterization

Characteristics	Items	N	Ratio (%)
Sample size		30	100
Region	North	12	40
	Central	8	26.67
	South	10	33.33
Age	Under 25 years old	6	20
	25-40 years old	18	60
	Over 40 years old	6	20
Place of purchase	Wet market	4	13.33
	Online platform	10	33.33
	Green food store	7	23.33
	Supermarkets	5	16.67
	Local farmers	2	6.67
	Minimart	0	0
	Self-cultivated	2	6.67

Source: Analysis results from survey data

A total of 30 in-depth interviews were carried out across Vietnam's three main regions: North, Central, and South. Each interview lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. Participants were given codes from A1 to A30 to maintain anonymity while keeping them identifiable for analysis. The data were recorded or noted, then transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 11. Using NVivo helped systematically explore the cultural and behavioral factors influencing the intention to consume green food.

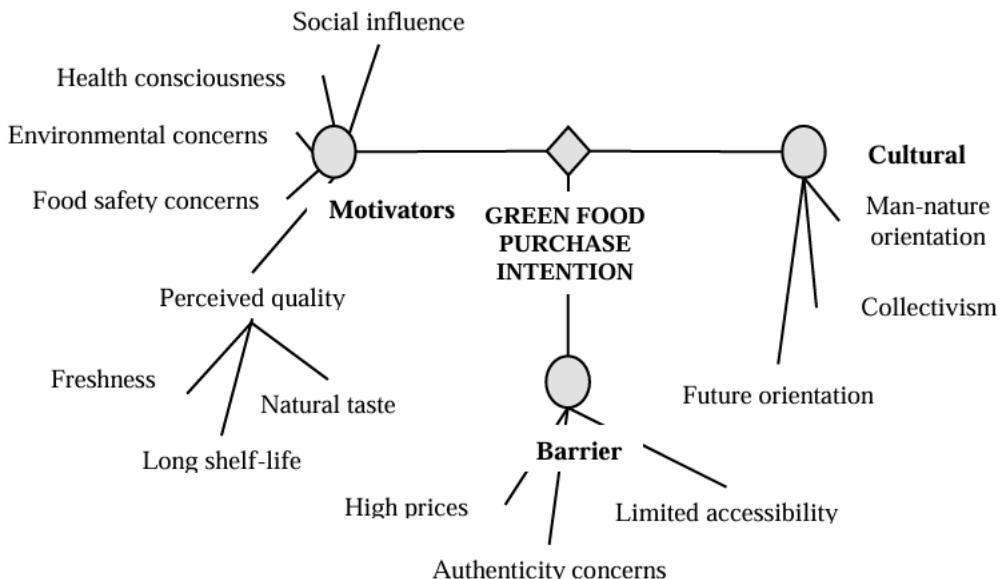


Figure 1: Analytical framework of the role of cultural and behavioral factors in green food purchase intention
Source: Construction by the author

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Previous research has shown that a range of behavioral factors influence consumers' willingness to buy environmentally friendly food items, such as attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Nguyen et al., 2017; Sreen et al., 2018). Specifically, motivators and barriers play vital roles in shaping whether consumers develop a positive or negative attitude (Attitude), whether they perceive support or opposition from important others (Subjective norms), and how easy or difficult they find purchasing green food (Perceived behavioral control). This study conducted in-depth interviews with 30 representative consumers utilizing thematic analysis, and classified the influencing factors into three categories: motivators, barriers, and cultural factors. Figure 1 presents the primary factors and participant comments organized by theme.

Behavioral Factors

Motivators

Social influence

Social influence plays a major role in driving the intention to buy green food (Rezai, 2012; Qi et al., 2020). Consumers are influenced by various social sources such as family, neighbors, friends, colleagues, health professionals, online communities, and local vendors. Importantly, households with young children, elderly members, or pregnant women often favor green food choices to protect their family's health and well-being.

“During my first pregnancy, I was advised by my physician to incorporate clean vegetables into my diet, prompting me to pay closer attention to my nutritional intake. Subsequently, I engaged in further research and viewed multimedia content regarding unsafe food products circulating on social media, which raised concerns and a sense of unease regarding food sources. Consequently, I endeavored to identify reputable suppliers of green produce, primarily for myself, my children, and my family.” (A2)

“My primary motivation for purchasing green food is to support the health of my elderly mother and my children. Additionally, as a preschool teacher, I recognize that food safety is a concern shared by both parents and colleagues. I also aim to serve as a positive role model for my students, who are being educated about the importance of healthy eating and sustainable living.” (A30)

- Health consciousness

Numerous studies have shown that consumers' intention to buy green food is shaped by their perception of health benefits (Chao & Uhagile, 2022; Leggett, 2020; Qi et al., 2020; Qi & Ploeger, 2019). In this study, personal and family health are key motivations for choosing green food. Consumers care not only about the immediate benefits but also about the long-term health impacts, especially for young children, their families, or themselves, particularly in contexts of unhealthy living conditions.

“My family has prioritized green food for many years. I can clearly observe the long-term benefits, particularly in my child’s digestive health, which has improved significantly.” (A15)

“I select green foods for my personal health. As I live alone, work in an office, and have irregular eating habits, I must choose nutritious foods to help maintain balance.” (A20)

- Environmental concerns

Environmental concern generally correlates positively with the intention to make green purchases (Ansari & Siddique, 2019), and this association is especially strong for green food consumption (Chao & Uhagile, 2022; Leggett, 2020; Qi et al., 2020; Qi & Ploeger, 2019; Woo & Kim, 2019). Consumers with higher environmental awareness tend to be more eager to buy eco-friendly foods, particularly those who lead eco-conscious lifestyles and prioritize sustainable development. These consumers choose organic food not only for personal benefits but also out of a desire to reduce environmental harm. However, for some low-income consumers, price often outweighs environmental considerations.

“I purchase fresh green produce that can be consumed on the same day to prevent spoilage. When I buy other perishable items, they tend to spoil quickly, resulting in increased waste. This not only leads to food wastage but also negatively impacts the environment, as sanitation workers are required to collect a greater amount of trash.” (A5)

“While I acknowledge that naturally grown vegetables employ fewer chemicals and contribute to soil preservation, this concern exceeds my current considerations. In rural areas, the cost of food generally takes precedence.” (A22)

- Food safety concerns

The problem of unsafe and contaminated food has become a major threat to consumer health both in Vietnam and around the world. To tackle these issues, consumers often choose green food as a safer option (Leggett, 2020). Research by Rezai (2012) indicates that people worried about food safety tend to have a stronger intention to buy green food. Consumers usually favor products with clear origins, proper certification, no chemical additives, and natural farming methods.

“I believe green foods have clearer origins; they are usually organic or certified safe vegetables without pesticides or chemicals. I feel much more confident eating them. In the past, I bought food from the local market, but now I only buy from certified stores.” (A3)

- Perceived quality

Qi and Ploeger (2019) suggest that green food is seen as a high-quality product. When consumers perceive a product as superior, nutritious, healthy, and safe, they tend to prefer it (Chao & Uhagile, 2022; Rezai, 2012). Most surveyed consumers view green food positively, especially regarding freshness, longer shelf life, and a more natural taste compared to conventional options.

“Vegetables cultivated naturally are generally cleaner and more fresh. When farmers have a surplus, they sell it directly, which prolongs its freshness. During cooking, I am able to appreciate the natural flavors; it is sweeter and more enjoyable because it is harvested and consumed on the same day. For instance, freshly picked bottle gourd has a significantly better taste than one that has been stored at the market for several days. Similarly, sweet potato leaves are more flavorful, tender, and fresher when consumed shortly after harvesting.” (A1)

Barriers

- High prices

Numerous studies suggest that, although consumers may prioritize health and environmental concerns, the elevated cost of eco-friendly food products continues to serve as a significant barrier in their decision-making process (Leggett, 2020; Qi et al., 2020). For lower-middle-income consumers and households with numerous members, adhering to a daily budget for green food becomes challenging, and they may altogether overlook green food despite recognizing its advantages.

"The paramount consideration is the price. Our family comprises many members, and we prepare two to three meals daily; therefore, meticulous financial planning is essential. If fresh, clean vegetables are reasonably priced, I will select them; however, if their cost exceeds our budget, I resort to purchasing regular market vegetables that are affordable. On several occasions, I have accompanied my daughter-in-law to the supermarket, where I observed the neatly packaged, clean vegetables, which appeared very attractive. Nevertheless, upon reviewing the prices, I found myself unable to justify purchasing them." (A8)

- Authenticity concerns

Consumers' distrust of labeling and certification systems, along with doubts about the authenticity of green food, pose a major barrier to purchasing these products (Leggett, 2020; Qi et al., 2020; Qi & Ploeger, 2019). Even when items are labeled as "clean," "organic," or bear official certification, many consumers remain skeptical. This concern reflects a lack of confidence in the products themselves and highlights a broader issue in Vietnam, where trust in the quality control system tends to be low.

"Green food is likely free of pesticides and may be cleaner; however, certainty remains elusive. In contemporary times, marketing is pervasive, yet trust remains limited. Occasionally, produce at the market appears fresher. Who can be trusted nowadays? I simply purchase what appears fresh and of good quality. Even within supermarkets, which utilize labels and stickers, skepticism persists, given the numerous scandals involving the sale of contaminated food." (A10)

- Limited accessibility

Qi et al. (2020) contend that supply limitations constitute a significant obstacle hindering consumers' access to green food. The procurement of green food is often impractical, particularly for busy individuals or those dependent on distribution channels such as online platforms and scheduled deliveries. Furthermore, accessibility disparities exist between urban and rural regions.

"Should I neglect to place an order beforehand and consequently fail to receive the delivery in a timely manner suitable for preparing lunch for my family, I am compelled to visit the nearby market as an alternative. Nonetheless, I predominantly endeavor to purchase organic products." (A17)

"I reside in the countryside; therefore, I typically patronize the local market or purchase from nearby neighbors. My daughter, who resides at a considerable distance, occasionally sends me links and addresses of online stores that offer organic food; however, this process is quite inconvenient, so I tend to buy whatever is readily accessible and nearby." (A4)

Cultural Factors

Future Orientation

Numerous studies have shown that long-term orientation influences the willingness to buy environmentally friendly products (Duong & Vu, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2017; Sreen et al., 2018). Consumers with this outlook tend to develop positive views about environmental conservation, aiming to secure the future well-being of themselves and their families, which increases their likelihood of choosing green products (Nguyen et al., 2017). Among interview participants, especially parents with young children, the preference for green food is often driven by a desire to invest in their families' long-term health, particularly for the benefit of future generations.

"I primarily purchase green foods for my two children. I strongly believe that our current diet profoundly influences our long-term health; therefore, investing in quality food is also an investment in health. Health is not immediately observable; it develops gradually over time. I strive to instill healthy eating habits in my children from a young age, so they can develop robust health and experience fewer illnesses." (A12)

Collectivism

Studies by Duong and Vu (2022) and Nguyen et al. (2017) show a positive link between collectivism and both green purchase intentions and attitudes. Collectivism significantly shapes social norms and can reduce perceptions of inconvenience associated with green buying (Nguyen et al., 2017). Most interviewees stated their main reasons for buying green food were to protect their families' health and to demonstrate social and environmental responsibility.

"I consume nutritious foods because they are beneficial for my health and that of my family. Additionally, I purchase organic produce to support small-scale farmers. Organic food is typically fresh, flavorful, and has a longer shelf life, thereby reducing waste and contributing to environmental sustainability. Moreover, this practice alleviates the burden on urban sanitation workers." (A1)

Man-Nature Orientation

Man-nature orientation reflects a cultural value emphasizing the importance of maintaining harmony between humans and the natural environment. It promotes living in alignment with nature instead of exploiting or dominating it (Hills, 2002). Sreen et al. (2018) observed that consumers who believe in harmonious coexistence with nature are more likely to buy eco-friendly products. Among interviewees, those with higher environmental awareness often showed this tendency through their choices of shopping sources and environmentally conscious consumption habits.

"I typically place orders directly via online platforms from farms that engage in natural and sustainable agricultural practices. The products available may not appear immaculate; they might possess unconventional shapes or lack vibrant coloration, yet I remain confident in their quality. These farms abstain from the use of chemicals during cultivation, thereby ensuring my safety and allowing me to contribute to environmental conservation. Additionally, I endeavor to minimize waste by utilizing cloth bags during my shopping activities." (A25).

CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in a literature review, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework, and in-depth interviews with 30 representative Vietnamese consumers, explored the behavioral and cultural factors that shape the intention to purchase green food. The analysis results revealed three main categories: motivators, barriers, and cultural influences. The findings indicate that motivators such as health consciousness, perceived quality, food safety concerns, and environmental concerns play a significant role in shaping positive consumer attitudes towards green food (Attitude). Furthermore, social influence, identified as another primary motivator, was determined to have a direct relationship with subjective norms. In contrast, obstacles such as elevated cost, restricted accessibility, and concerns regarding authenticity adversely affected perceived behavioral control. This investigation collectively designates these obstacles as "perceived inconvenience" in the context of green food consumption. Furthermore, the study proposes an expansion of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model by incorporating cultural dimensions such as future orientation, collectivism, and man-nature orientation, thereby illustrating the significant impact of cultural context in shaping consumers' behavioral intentions toward green food.

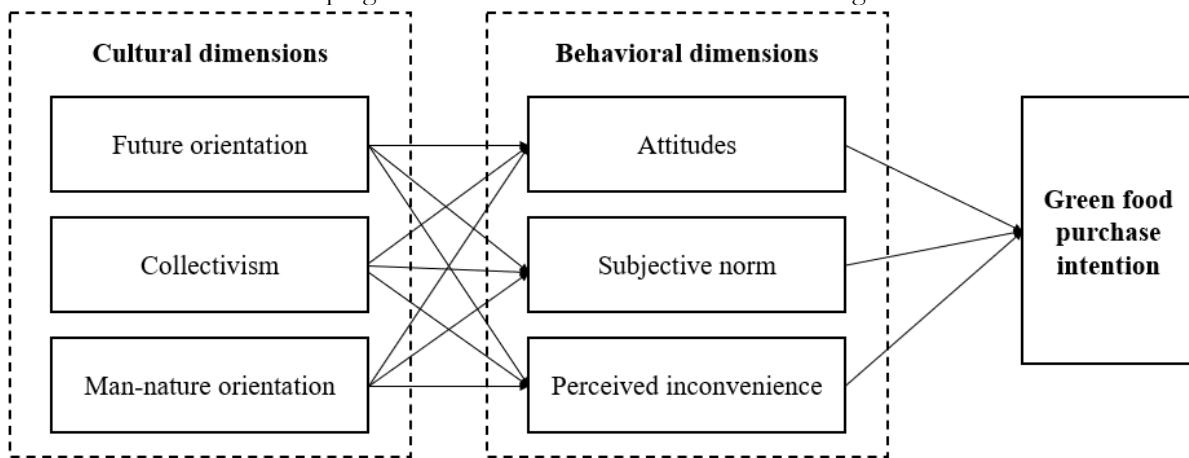


Figure 2: Quantitative research model

Source: Proposed by the author

These findings expand the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model within the context of green food consumption research in Vietnam and lay a practical groundwork for developing the proposed quantitative research model in the next phase, as shown in Figure 2. As a result, the study significantly contributes to both theoretical advancements and practical efforts to promote sustainable consumption in an emerging economy like Vietnam.

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