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The Shift Towards Plant-Based Lifestyles: Factors Driving Young Consumers' Decisions to Choose Plant-Based Food Products

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Abstract: The shift in consumer dietary patterns from meat-based to plant-based food products has become a prominent trend worldwide. This shift is driven by various factors, including concerns about personal health and environmental awareness. Despite the global growth of the plant-based food industry, developing nations tend to be slow with adopting non-meat-based diets. This is mainly due to high levels of food insecurity and meat being the main source of protein, especially in countries like South Africa where food consumption is needs-based, and consumers are unaware of the environmental footprint of meat production. This paper is part of a two-phase study and reports on the quantitative results, which were obtained during the second phase. The main aim of this study was to investigate the factors that influence consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products. The factors that were selected were informed by the thematic results from phase 1, which involved focus groups that explored consumers' opinions and behaviours towards plant-based lifestyles. By means of survey distribution, 426 online questionnaires were distributed among young consumers in South Africa. A conceptual model with six hypotheses was tested and the data were analysed using SmartPLS 4.1.0.8. The findings indicated the product taste and product knowledge are the most important factors that drive young consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products. The study further found that product quality, affordability, social influence, and product packaging play a role but to a lesser degree. Food marketers can utilise these findings and implement marketing strategies that can assist with persuading consumers to choose plant-based food products and adopt a healthier, more sustainable lifestyle.

Keywords: plant-based food products; plant-based lifestyles; consumer buying behaviour; youth consumers; sustainability; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Consumer dietary patterns are undergoing a significant shift from traditional meat-based diets to plant-based lifestyles. Consumers are increasingly recognising the health benefits of plant-based diets, which are typically rich in nutrients and lower in saturated fats compared to meat-based diets [1]. Furthermore, these diets are notably higher in dietary fibre, vitamins such as C and E, and folate (B9), while minerals like magnesium and potassium are also more prevalent in plant-based diets. Plant-based foods are further enriched with phytochemicals, such as flavonoids and carotenoids, which act as antioxidants, offering anti-inflammatory and anticancer benefits, as well as beta-carotene [1]. Additionally, plant-based diets have been associated with a reduced risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, and osteoporosis [2]. Additionally, the environmental impact of meat production is a key concern for many consumers [3]. This shift towards plant-based diets is attributed to their lower carbon footprint and reduced water usage compared to animal agriculture. It is generally accepted that a plant-based diet, or a diet rich in plant-based foods, is more environmentally friendly compared to a diet rich

in meat (beef, poultry, and pork) due to fewer natural resources utilised to grow the foods. Furthermore, it is accepted that a plant-based diet causes considerably less environmental degradation than the alternative [4].

Marketers can leverage both rational and emotional appeals to influence consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products [5]. Rational appeals may include focusing on the health benefits of plant-based diets, such as lower saturated fat content, higher nutrient density, and reduced risk of chronic diseases, as well as the environmental advantages, such as lower carbon footprint and reduced water usage [6]. This factual information can appeal to consumers who prioritise their health and are concerned about sustainable choices [6]. On the other hand, emotional appeals can be used to connect with consumers on a deeper level [7,8]. Marketers can emphasise the compassion and empathy for animals, the positive impact on the planet, and the sense of contribution to a greater cause when choosing plant-based foods. By tapping into consumers' emotions, marketers can effectively influence their purchasing decisions and foster a sense of purpose and fulfilment [9]. Furthermore, highlighting the delicious and diverse range of plant-based food options can also be a persuasive strategy [10]. Showcasing mouth-watering plant-based meals and recipes can attract curious consumers and dispel any misconceptions about plant-based diets being restrictive or bland [11]. By appealing to both rational and emotional aspects, marketers can successfully encourage consumers to make the switch to plant-based food products [12].

2. Research Problem

Against the backdrop of the rising health concerns and ecological footprint of the meat industry, consumers are slowly adopting healthier lifestyles and embracing alternative food options. Globally, this shift to eco-friendlier eating patterns seems to be growing at a steady rate. A study conducted in Finland of 1000 consumers between 18 and 79 years of age indicated whether their diets changed from a traditional 'Western diet', which is high in meat consumption, to a more plant-based diet. Of the respondents, 43.3% reported 'No change' in their diets, while 30.4% indicated 'Less red meat, more plant proteins', 17.9% 'Less red meat, more poultry', and 8.4% 'No/very little meat, more plant proteins'. This indicates that more than half of the respondents changed their diets to include more plant-based alternatives and less meat-based protein options [13]. However, in South Africa, a major component of the consumer diet still consists of meat consumption. This includes both domesticated animals, as well as wild animal species (venison). Meat consumption does, however, depend on its availability, the price, the heritage, and the culture of the South African population [14]; thus, more research is required to understand how marketers can influence these consumption decisions. In a study conducted by Ho (2021), the findings showed that two-thirds of South African consumers are interested in plant-based products (PBPs), with the youth being the most open to trying out new things and willing to spend more money on products that meet their sustainability requirements [15,16]. There has been a significant number of studies that have explored the link between sustainable eating and health concerns. The impacts of elements of the (green) marketing mix on sustainability have been explored across different topics like in Nguyen-Viet's [17] study based on the influence of brand equity on green consumers. Furthermore, Beacom, Bogue, and Repar [15] assessed the consumption of PBPs and its effects, along with the drivers and barriers towards it. Multiple studies also emphasise consumers taking responsible sustainable measures to better the environment and partake in healthy diets, with such studies making up the bulk of the research in sustainability [16,18–20]. In light of this lifestyle shift towards plant-based food consumption, it is important for marketers to understand the driving forces that can influence consumers' preferences, motivations, and barriers towards adopting plant-based diets, as these can provide valuable insights for marketers. Marketers can tailor their messages and product offerings to effectively engage with their target audience. Therefore, by staying attuned to consumer preferences, they

can encourage them to explore and embrace plant-based alternatives. This study aimed to answer the following question:

What factors drive young consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products?

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. The Environmental Impact of Food Production

Food consumption has been linked to substantial evidence of damages to the environment, both from the production and consumption of food. The food economy impacts the environment at every stage, starting from preparing the land for agricultural purposes to growing crops, processing the food for distribution, and ultimately food waste after consumption [21]. Understanding and addressing the environmental impact of global food consumption is crucial for sustainable resource management and the preservation of the planet's ecosystems [22]. Gaining insight into the consequences of the global food production system, we can develop strategies to promote more sustainable and environmentally friendly food systems. Population growth projections for the next 10–50 years [23], as well as the increase in meat consumption globally [24], highlights the need to improve the quality and environmental sustainability of our food systems [21]. The impact of food production and consumption on the environment is influenced by various factors [25]. These factors include land use changes for agricultural purposes, water usage, greenhouse gas emissions from farming practices and transportation, deforestation for expanding agricultural land, and the pollution and waste generated during food processing and packaging [25]. Furthermore, the shift towards more animal source foods in diets has a higher environmental cost compared to plant-based diets [26,27]. Promoting plant-based diets on a global scale can contribute to mitigating the environmental impact of food production and consumption. This shift can also lead to improvements in public health by reducing the prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases [6]. Encouraging individuals to make more sustainable and environmentally friendly food choices is essential for achieving a more balanced and sustainable food system for future generations [28]. By promoting and adopting plant-based diets, we can significantly reduce the environmental cost of food consumption as well [29].

3.2. Transitioning Towards Sustainable Food Consumption

Consumers are increasingly adopting and transitioning towards plant-based food diets. Currently, international trends that indicate a move towards a more plant-based diet vary considerably, but it is estimated that less than 10% of the total population adhere to a plant-based diet, with India being an exception, with 20% of adult consumers identifying as vegetarian [30]. A poll conducted in the United States in 2020 indicated that about 6% of adult consumers followed a vegetarian diet, and that half of these consumers were vegan [31], while a similar study found that about 2% of children aged between 8 and 17 years of age followed a vegan diet, and 3% followed a non-vegan, vegetarian diet in the US [32]. Furthermore, globally, the market for dairy-alternative products is expected to reach USD 25 billion by 2026 [33]; US sales of plant-based dairy alternatives and plant-based meats increased by 27% from 2019 to 2020 with a total value of USD 7 billion [34]. One of the main reasons for this shift is the growing awareness of the environmental impact of food consumption [35]. As discussed earlier, plant-based diets have a lower environmental footprint compared to diets rich in animal source foods [36]. This realisation has led to a significant change in consumer behaviour, with more individuals choosing plant-based options to reduce their carbon footprint and contribute to environmental sustainability. The advantages of plant-based diets are becoming more evident to consumers. Not only do these diets have a positive impact on the environment, but they are also associated with various health benefits. Research has shown that plant-based diets can help lower the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer. As consumers become more health-conscious, the appeal of plant-based diets continues to grow [37].

Looking to the future, it is predicted that consumers will continue to shift towards plant-based diets as environmental awareness and health concerns become more prominent. This behavioural shift is expected to drive innovation and growth in the plant-based food industry, leading to an expansion of plant-based food options and alternatives in the global market. Additionally, as the demand for plant-based products increases, there is potential for the food industry to develop more sustainable and environmentally friendly food systems to meet the needs of consumers.

3.3. Plant-Based Food Products

Plant-based food products refer to food items that are primarily derived from plant sources, such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, nuts, and seeds [36]. They can be consumed in their whole form or processed into various plant-based alternatives, which mimic the texture and taste of animal-based products [38]. These products are designed to provide alternatives to traditional animal-based foods, offering consumers a variety of options to incorporate plant-based ingredients into their diets.

Plant-based burgers, for example, are crafted using ingredients like peas, lentils, mushrooms, and beets to create a texture and flavour that is similar to traditional beef burgers. These plant-based alternatives cater for both the consumers who regard it as a more environmentally friendly option and those who seek meat replacement products. Dairy-free milk alternatives, including almond milk and oat milk, provide individuals with alternatives to traditional cow's milk. These plant-based milks are produced from nuts, grains, or seeds and offer a wide range of nutritional benefits while also addressing concerns related to animal agriculture and environmental impact [39].

The availability and diversity of plant-based food products continue to expand, driven by the increasing demand for sustainable and ethical food choices. As consumers become more conscious of the environmental impact of their food consumption, the market for these products is projected to grow, offering a wide range of options for individuals seeking to incorporate more plant-based options into their diets.

While plant-based diets offer numerous health and environmental benefits, they also come with certain limitations compared to meat-based diets. One key challenge is the potential for nutrient deficiencies, particularly in vitamin B12, iron (specifically heme iron), calcium, zinc, and omega-3 fatty acids, which are more bioavailable in animal-based foods. Vitamin B12, critical for nerve function and DNA synthesis, is naturally found only in animal products, so supplementation or fortified foods are required for those on a plant-based diet. Iron from plant sources (non-heme iron) is less efficiently absorbed by the body compared to heme iron from meat. Additionally, protein quality can sometimes be lower in plant-based diets, as some plant proteins lack all essential amino acids in the proportions needed by the body, although this can be mitigated by eating a variety of plant foods. These limitations can pose health risks if not properly managed through dietary planning or supplementation. Without careful attention to these nutrients, individuals following a plant-based diet are at risk of nutrient deficiencies, which could impact overall health [40].

In South Africa, the market for plant-based food products has seen significant growth in recent years. The rapidly expanding vegan food market is growing at an annual compound growth rate of 18.1%, with the total global market predicted to reach ZAR 1698 trillion in 2027. Within South Africa, the vegan, vegetarian, and flexitarian consumer markets consisted of between 10 and 12% of the South African population in 2023. This has led to established food retailers expanding and promoting their vegan offerings, while new plant-based-focused retailers have entered the market. Furthermore, the country's fast-food franchises saw a 20–24% rise in adoption of plant-based products between 2022 and 2023, which is expected to increase further in 2024 [41]. The acceptability of plant-based protein alternatives is also increasing in South Africa specifically and the market value is expected to reach USD 561 million in 2023, accounting for more than half of the alternative meat market in Africa [42]. Retailers such as Woolworths, Pick 'n Pay, and Checkers [43], as well as other well-known brands, have played a pivotal role in offering a wide range of

plant-based options to consumers across the country. These products are not only easily accessible but also cater to diverse dietary preferences (vegan, vegetarian, and flexitarian diets). The availability of plant-based meat alternatives, dairy-free milk, and other plant-based products in South African retail outlets reflects the increasing demand for sustainable and ethical food choices. As more consumers become conscious of the environmental impact of their food consumption, the market for plant-based food products is expected to continue expanding, offering even more variety and innovation [44]. Additionally, the growing accessibility of these products contributes to promoting environmentally friendly and health-conscious food choices among the South African population [45].

Therefore, the availability of plant-based food products in South Africa's retail market reflects a global shift towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly food choices. With the rise of consumer consciousness of the benefits of plant-based diets, the demand for these products is likely to rise. This ultimately contributes to a more balanced and sustainable food system for the future [36].

3.4. The Youth and Plant-Based Lifestyles

In the context of growing sustainability and awareness among the youth, they have emerged as the primary drivers of plant-based lifestyles. They have always been a catalyst for change and the UN reports that 7 out of 10 young people want to be part of the green movement [46]. A significant way in which young people are expressing their environmental concerns is by eating vegan food [46]. Generation Y and X are also known to be open to new experiences and more willing than other generations to try different products [47]. According to a survey by the global non-profit Veganuary, which promotes veganism, 706,965 people committed to trying a vegan diet during the 2023 campaign. Notably, 35% of these participants were between 18 and 34 years old. This suggests that younger individuals recognise the importance of transitioning to a vegan lifestyle and are actively embracing this change in large numbers [46]. While individuals have diverse motivations for adopting a vegan diet, 40% of participants in Veganuary's survey cited their compassion for animals and opposition to the cruel practices of industrial animal farming as the primary reasons. Additionally, 21% sought to improve their personal health, while 18% were driven by environmental concerns [46]. This study therefore focuses on youth consumers between the ages of 18 and 35.

4. Hypotheses Development and Conceptual Model

This study seeks to test a theoretical framework guided by the ELM. It includes six constructs: knowledge of the product, quality of the product, affordability, taste, packaging, and social influence. Six hypotheses are tested to examine the relationships between these factors and consumers' behavioural intention towards plant-based food products. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model.

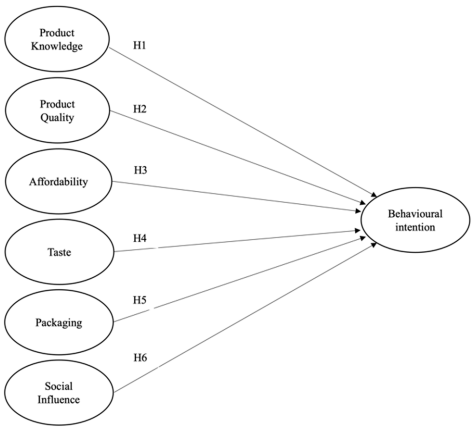

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model.

4.1. Product Knowledge and Behavioural Intention

Consumers with in-depth product knowledge are more likely to make informed purchasing decisions. When consumers understand the features, benefits, and uses of a product, they can assess its suitability and make confident choices [39]. Access to product knowledge also increases brand loyalty, as consumers display more trust in a brand and often advocate for the brand and recommend it to others [48]. Consumers tend to consider the functional consequences of their buying decision based on the product knowledge they acquire. This study, therefore, proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: *Product knowledge has a significant and positive influence on consumers' behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

4.2. Product Quality and Behavioural Intention

Product quality refers to the attributes and characteristics of a product. Good quality indicates that the product is reliable and effectively performs its functions [49]. High-quality products have the ability to satisfy consumers' needs and create more value for consumers [50]. For instance, organic food is frequently perceived as being of superior quality compared to conventional food due to its natural production process, which excludes pesticides, bioengineering, and synthetic fertilisers [51]. Consequently, consumers often choose to purchase organic food when they take the quality of food into their purchase decision [49]. This study, therefore, proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: *Product quality has a significant and positive influence on consumers' behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

4.3. Affordability and Behavioural Intention

Price has been reported as a key factor that has a direct influence on consumers' intention to purchase organic food [49]. Price-conscious consumers may prioritise the cost of organic food in their purchasing decisions, potentially choosing to buy more when prices are low and favouring conventional options when prices are high [52]. In contrast, consumers who are less influenced by price may focus more on non-price factors such as freshness, nutrition, taste, and safety when evaluating organic products [53]. Therefore, consumers who perceive plant-based food products to be affordable are more likely to purchase such products. This study, therefore, proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: *Affordability has a positive and significant influence on consumers' behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

4.4. Taste and Behavioural Intention

Several studies have been conducted on the importance of taste, flavour, and texture in consumers' decisions to choose a plant-based food product. For instance, Maehle et al.'s [54] research in the UK revealed that price and taste were the most significant factors for both hedonic and utilitarian food products, while health-related and environmental attributes took a back seat. According to Wood [55], the primary factors for choosing food products are flavour, texture, and nutritional value. Consumers, therefore, frequently choose to buy organic food for its health advantages, safety, flavour, and nutritional value [56]. This study, therefore, proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: *Taste has a significant and positive influence on consumers' behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

4.5. Packaging and Behavioural Intention

Food marketing uses packaging to attract consumers, with packaging colour being a key factor in improving consumer perceptions and increasing purchasing intentions. For

instance, a study conducted by da Fonseca et al. [57] revealed that consumers of plant-based food products are mostly attracted to packaging colours such as green, yellow, and white. These colours tend to attract attention and induce emotions related to nature, health, and nutritional value of plant-based food products. In a study conducted by Sucapane et al. [58], it was found that packaging and product descriptors have a significant effect on consumers' perceptions of plant-based food products. Consumers are, therefore, more inclined to choose a plant-based food product if the packaging appeals to them. This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5: *Packaging has a significant and positive influence on consumers' behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

4.6. Social Influence and Behavioural Intention

An individual's decision to eat or not eat meat is not made in isolation. People tend to adjust their food choice and intake to affiliate with those around them such as parents, teachers, and peers [59]. Without realising it, people will mimic each other's eating behaviour as a way to affiliate and integrate with others [60]. In a real-world study that was conducted in Germany, the impact of social norms on meat consumption found that direct normative influence leads to convergence towards vegetarian meal choices [61]. This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H6: *Social influence has a significant and positive influence on the behavioural intention to consume plant-based food products*.

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Data Collection and Sampling

This study undertook a quantitative approach and 448 online surveys were distributed among young consumers using the university intranet, social media platforms, and the student database of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. The university has a large database and the general profile of the students correlates with the target population for this study (individuals between the ages of 18 and 24). The sample therefore comprised individuals who can be categorised as part of Generation Y (18 to 35 years old). Using the university intranet, the survey link was posted on the blackboard system, and registered students were invited to complete the survey.

The survey link was also sent to the faculty registrar, who distributed the link using the university's student database, via their university email addresses. Further, the link was posted on social media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, inviting respondents to complete the survey. A screening question was used to ensure that the participants fell within the required age category (between 18 and 35). With a 95% response rate, 426 surveys were usable and the rest were discarded.

5.2. Ethics

This study followed a strict ethical procedure. Prior to commencing with the data collection, approval was obtained from the ethics committee at the University of the Witwatersrand. Each participant completed a consent form prior to the study and participation was voluntary. Participants were allowed to withdraw from participating at any stage during the questionnaire answering process. The participants were informed that they would not receive any benefits from participating in the research. Additionally, participants were informed that any personal information gathered would be protected on a password-protected laptop which was only accessible to the researchers and would only be used for the purpose of this research study. The ethical clearance certificate was issued on 21 June 2023 with the protocol number H22/10/03.

5.3. Measurement Scale Development

The questionnaire was developed using existing scales that were adapted to suit the context of the study. A five-point scale was used, ranging from 1 = highly disagree to 5 = highly agree. The following scales were used: Product knowledge was measured using an 8-item scale that was adapted from Seiders, Voss, Godfrey, and Grewal (2007) [62], and Sharma and Patterson (2000) [63]. This scale measured the degree of knowledge a participant had regarding plant-based food products. Product quality was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Yu, Luo, and Zhu's (2018) [64] product quality scale. Affordability was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal's (1991) [65] perceived price scale. To measure taste, a subsection of Lahti et al.'s (2021) [66] multidimensional behavioural reasoning scale was adapted. The scale originally measured three dimensions (lack of information, habit, and taste), as a means to determine consumers' reasons against choosing plant-based food products. For the purpose of this study, the 3-item taste dimension was used. To measure package design, a 10-item scale from Kauppi and van der Schaar (2020) [67] was adapted to fit the context of the study. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) [68] 3-item subjective norm scale was used to measure social influence. Lastly, behaviour intention was measured using an adaptation from Honkanen, Verplanken, and Olsen's (2006) [69] 3-item behavioural intention scale. Further, the respondents were asked how often they consumed plant-based food products. This question was supported by visual examples from three popular plant-based food brands (Frys, Simple Truth, and Live Well) that are commonly available from grocery chain stores. Before distribution, the questionnaire was pilot-tested among 22 participants. All the scales indicated acceptable levels of reliability and validity, therefore requiring no changes to the questionnaire. Participants were informed that the questionnaire would take about 10-15 min to complete, which was confirmed during the pilot study.

5.4. Data Analysis and Results

5.4.1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographics of the study showed that females constituted the majority of respondents (62%), with the largest age group (60%) being between 20 and 25 years of age. The income distribution indicated that the two largest income groups were the lowest and highest earning groups. For instance, those earning less than ZAR 10,000 (<USD 500) per month comprised 21% of the respondents, while those earning above ZAR 50,000 (>USD 2500) comprised 23% of the respondents. This is a true reflection of the unequal income distribution in South Africa. It was further found that about 35% earned either below ZAR 20,000 (<USD 1000) or above ZAR 40,000 (>USD 2000), with the smallest category being the middle-income group. The results for general food consumption reflected that 60% spend less than ZAR 20,000 (<USD 500) on food per month with the remaining 40% spending above ZAR 20,000 (>USD 1000). When asked about the consumption of plant-based food products, the majority (55%) indicated that they buy plant-based food products at least once a week. The rest were more-or-less equally distributed between once a month (18%), once every three months (13%), and never (13%).

5.4.2. Testing for Scale Reliability and Validity

To assess the reliability of the measurement scales, the Cronbach alpha coefficient (CA) and the composite reliability (CR) were assessed.

The results are presented in Table 1. It is evident that all the CA values range between 0.726 and 0.918, therefore meeting the required minimum value of 0.70 as recommended by Hair, Ringle, Sarstedt, and Gufergan [70] (PK: $\alpha = 0.902$; PQ: $\alpha = 0.726$; AFF: $\alpha = 0.906$; TA: $\alpha = 0.904$; PD: $\alpha = 0.794$; SI: $\alpha = 0.909$; BI: $\alpha = 0.918$). Upon assessing the CR, the values all ranged between 0.784 and 0.938, which was deemed acceptable as they exceed the threshold of 0.7 [71] (PK = 0.927; PQ = 0.784; AFF = 0.933; TA = 0.906; PD = 0.786; SI = 0.938; BI = 0.922).

Table 1. Reliability and validity construct measurement.

	Cronbach's Alpha (CA)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Affordability	0.906	0.933	0.677
Behavioural Intention	0.918	0.922	0.860
Packaging	0.794	0.786	0.322
Product Knowledge	0.902	0.927	0.594
Product Quality	0.726	0.784	0.549
Social Influence	0.909	0.938	0.844
Taste	0.904	0.906	0.913

The validity of the scales was measured using the following tests: convergent validity (CV) and discriminant validity (DV). To test the CV, the average variance extracted (AVE) (Table 1) was examined and an exploratory factor analysis was carried out to assess the factor loadings. The recommended AVE value should be above 0.5; however, when the Cronbach alpha and composite reliability are above the 0.7 threshold, an AVE value below 0.5 can be accepted [72]. Based on the results, three constructs met the 0.7 threshold (taste, social influence, and behavioural intention). The remaining four constructs ranged between 0.55 and 0.67 but were deemed acceptable as their values were above 0.5.

The discriminant validity (DV) (Table 2) was assessed by examining the inter-construct correlations. An acceptable value is below 0.85 [73]. From the results, it is evident that all the constructs met the requirements and are below 0.85, therefore indicating that discriminant validity was achieved for all constructs.

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

	Affordability	Behavioural Intention	Packaging	Product Knowledge	Product Quality	Social Influence	Taste
Affordability							
Behavioural Intention	0.500						
Packaging	0.241	0.213					
Product Knowledge	0.307	0.604	0.205				
Product Quality	0.591	0.601	0.326	0.513			
Social Influence	0.349	0.225	0.194	0.144	0.224		
Taste	0.403	0.699	0.119	0.464	0.452	0.034	

5.4.3. Assessing Model Fit

Assessing the model fit entails the assessment of a number of indices. For this study, the following indices were used to test the structural model's fit: SRMR (standardised root mean square residual), d_ULS (squared Euclidean distance), d_G (geodesic distance), chi-square, and NFI (normed fit index). Table 3 presents the model fit summary statistics.

The model fit assessment results indicated an acceptable fit. The SRMR value was 0.09, less than 0.10; the d_ULS and d_G values were 1.407 and 0.505, respectively, which are greater than $p > 0.05$; the chi-square value was 1247.145; and the NFI was 0.746 (values closer to 1 indicate a better fit).

Table 3. Model fit summary statistics.

	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.075	0.075
d_ULS	3.961	3.961
d_G	0.970	0.970
Chi-square	2397.569	2397.569
NFI	0.747	0.747

5.4.4. Hypotheses Testing and Path Coefficients

Table 4 presents the results of the hypotheses and path coefficients. The conceptual model tested six hypotheses, and the results indicate that all six hypotheses are supported and significant.

Table 4. Hypotheses results.

Hypotheses	Proposed Relationship	*t*-Statistics	Path Coefficient	*p*-Value	Results
H1	Product Knowledge -> Behavioural Intention	6.721	0.263	0.000	Significant
H2	Product Quality -> Behavioural Intention	4.100	0.165	0.000	Significant
H3	Affordability -> Behavioural Intention	2.579	0.105	0.010	Significant
H4	Packaging -> Behavioural Intention	2.617	0.078	0.009	Significant
H5	Taste -> Behavioural Intention	10.066	0.409	0.000	Significant
H6	Social Influence -> Behavioural Intention	2.858	0.101	0.004	Significant

Upon examining the hypotheses results, it was found that the strongest relationship is between taste and behavioural intention (β = 0.409). This indicates that from all the predictor variables, the taste of plant-based food products is the most important determining factor for consumers' purchase intention. The second strongest predictor variable is product knowledge (β = 0.263). It is therefore evident that the more knowledge a consumer has of a plant-based food product, the more likely that they will consider buying it. Product quality (β = 0.165) had the third largest influence on consumers' intention to purchase plant-based food products. This indicates that plant-based food products must be of good quality for consumers to consider buying them. Product affordability (β = 0.105) was ranked as the fourth most important factor that influenced consumers' decisions to purchase plant-based food products. Consumers therefore consider the price of the product, but it is not a crucial factor when buying plant-based food products. And lastly, social influence (β = 0.101) and packaging (β = 0.078) were the two least important factors when buying plant-based food products. In summary, all six predictor variables (product quality, product knowledge, affordability, packaging, taste, and social influence) have a direct influence on consumers' intention to choose a plant-based food product.

6. Discussion and Managerial Implications

In this section, we present the results of this study and provide managerial implications that plant-based food companies can use to influence consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products. The most important factor that food marketers must consider is the taste of the plant-based food product. Several studies have investigated this relationship, and the findings of this study are consistent with those of Maele et al. [54], Wood [55], and Grimmer and Miles [56], who all found that taste is a crucial factor when consumers buy plant-based food products. In addition to taste being a crucial element that influences consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products, the knowledge they have of the product has a significant effect on whether consumers buy it.

Food marketers must provide consumers with in-depth knowledge on the food content, the nutritional information, and the health benefits of plant-based food products. With the substantial exposure young consumers have to information these days, they tend to be more knowledgeable and more competent when it comes to understanding the product content and nutritional information. With this generation being more health-conscious, they pay more attention to product content and ingredients such as artificial colourants, preservatives, etc. This finding is consistent with the existing literature that reiterates the importance of informing consumers about the features, benefits, and uses of plant-based food products [48].

Another important product attribute that can persuade consumers to buy plant-based food products is the quality of the product. Organic food is frequently perceived as being of superior quality compared to conventional food due to its natural production process, which excludes pesticides, bioengineering, and synthetic fertilisers [51]. The quality of a plant-based food product is also evident in the consistent and reliable performance of the product [49]. Young consumers are faced with a broad variety of product choices and have more options to choose from in comparison to older generations. Food companies should focus on the quality of their food as a means to create a competitive advantage.

Furthermore, from the results obtained in this study, affordability was rated the fourth most important factor when buying plant-based food products (after taste, product knowledge, and product quality). This indicates that although consumers regard the price and affordability as attributes that will influence their decision, it is not one of the most important factors. In slight contrast to the present study, previous research has emphasised that price is a crucial factor when consumers buy plant-based food products [49,52,53].

The last two factors, social influence and packaging, also reflected significant relationships, yet these relationships were weaker than with the previous factors. Social influence therefore influences consumers' decisions to purchase plant-based food products. This is consistent with previous research [59–61]. Food marketers can use influencer marketing on social networking sites to inform target consumers. Advertising appeals can also portray the element of social acceptance when advertising plant-based food products. This generation is more active on social media platforms than older generations, therefore making platforms like TikTok and Instagram feasible options.

Lastly, packaging influences consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products, although this factor is not as important as taste, product knowledge, product quality, affordability, or social influence. Food marketers should therefore invest in the abovementioned product attributes as opposed to investing large amounts of money into appealing product packaging. Previous research has highlighted that colours have quite a significant effect on consumers' buying behaviour [57,58]. Food companies can therefore use colours that consumers are most likely to respond to.

The study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the conceptual model included only six variables from a multitude of factors that could potentially have an effect on the consumers' decision to choose plant-based food products. Future research could explore other factors, such as consumers' values and belief systems, cultural factors, psychological factors, etc. Secondly, this study was conducted among a generalised sample of young consumers in South Africa; future research should investigate the behaviour of different demographic profiles (e.g., males and females; different age groups; different income levels) to draw comparisons between groups and even different countries. And lastly, great insight could be obtained from conducting a qualitative study that explores the deeper motivations for consumers choosing or not choosing plant-based food products.

7. Conclusions

The main aim of this study was to investigate the factors that influence young consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products. It was part of a two-phase study and reports on the quantitative results, which were obtained as part of phase 2. The factors that were selected were informed by the thematic results from phase 1, which

involved focus groups that explored consumers' opinions and behaviours with regard to plant-based lifestyles. This quantitative study involved distributing 426 online surveys among young consumers in South Africa. A conceptual model with six hypotheses was tested and analysed using SmartPLS. The results revealed that taste and product knowledge are the most important factors that influence young consumers' decisions to choose plant-based food products. These findings offer insights for food marketers to develop strategies that persuade consumers towards choosing plant-based products for a healthier sustainable lifestyle.

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