

Health-Conscious Consumers' Perspectives on Functional Foods: Do they know enough?

Avilasha Ramdut, Elizabeth Kempen

University of South Africa, Florida, South Africa

Abstract

Introduction: A growing awareness exists among consumers of the link between nutrition and overall well-being although a greater understanding seems needed of how to improve their diets to achieve optimal health. 'Functional foods', developed to expedite consumers intake of a nutritious foods, may not be effective in this way. The Theory of Planned Behaviour was used to explore the health-conscious consumers intents in purchasing functional foods.

Methodology: A qualitative exploratory study, including convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling strategies was used to recruit 38 health-conscious South African participants. 10 digitally recorded online individual and 11 focus group interviews was used to gather data. Transcribed data was content analysed to identify codes and categories that best represented emerging ideas. Trustworthiness criteria was applied to ensure credibility of the findings. Ethics approval was obtained.

Results and discussion: The findings suggest that health-conscious consumers' comprehension and consumption of functional foods were associated with the nutritional and health advantages of these foods. Participant explanations of functional foods were resembled that of conventional and modified functional foods, although without the ability to explain these terms. Health-conscious consumers' desire to purchase and consume functional foods was influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. A lack in interest resulted in unawareness, lack of comprehension and no role of functional foods in the diets of some participants. Contrary to this, availability, accessibility, in close proximity and noted on a shopping list were reasons for including functional foods in the diets of other participants. The lack of knowledge, price, availability, lifestyle and flavour of functional foods restricted the acquisition and utilisation of these foods.

Conclusion: Health-conscious consumers' behaviour towards functional foods has been brought to light through this study. The findings reveal a concerning lack of consumer knowledge of conventional and modified functional foods, acting as a barrier towards purchase intent and consumption. Health-conscious consumer education and improved marketing may promote effective utilization of functional foods. By not addressing consumers' lack of knowledge, consumers will remain uninformed on the positive contribution of functional foods to their overall health and wellbeing.