

Female Consumers' Health Consciousness: Does It Reflect in Their Food Decisions?

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Abstract

Introduction: Despite female consumers' higher levels of health consciousness and the global revolution towards healthier lifestyles and diets, South African women demonstrate the highest prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) globally. Considering their pivotal role in household food decisions, female consumers are generally interested in health-related nutrition information. This study investigated the health consciousness of female consumers against their health perceptions and packaged food selection in a South African context.

Methodology: We purposively recruited female consumers (N = 416) involved in household food purchases. An online questionnaire was developed that applied a standardized health consciousness scale and questions (Likert-scale) about their health perceptions regarding packaged food. Respondents were also required to choose the healthiest option across four product categories (i.e., fat spread, oats, peanut butter, and yoghurt).

Results and Discussion: On average, respondents were "quite a bit" health conscious (mean = 3.80 ± 0.70). They mainly relied on "naturalness", "high in claims", food "label" information, and "low in claims" as essential health indicators for packaged food (factor scores = 3.64 ± 0.85 to 4.06 ± 0.78). The health consciousness factor correlated with these health perceptions ($r = 0.30$ to 0.36), highlighting the respondents' appreciation of diverse health-related food label information and their cognition of the food-health link. Results showed no associations between respondents' health consciousness and the correct food product selections.

Conclusions: Respondents' food choices did not reflect their relatively high degree of health consciousness, as they were unable to identify the healthier option across all product categories presented. This disparity suggests that consumers' uncertainty regarding food label information impedes their efforts to integrate their health-related interests during food decision-making. Consumers can only make more informed, healthier food decisions if they understand health-related label information, which shapes their health perceptions of packaged food. A concerted effort involving consumers, the food industry, and policymakers may foster a culture of health consciousness among South African consumers, essentially improving the population's health status.

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Miss Abrahams obtained her Master's degree (Cum laude) in Consumer Sciences in 2020. She is an experienced lecturer at the North-West University where she specialises in undergraduate training in consumer behaviour, animal and plant-based food groups and systems, and food quality management. Her research and post graduate supervision focus on consumer behaviour in a food and nutrition context, specifically health consciousness, health perceptions, food product evaluation and food labels.