

Determinants of purchase intentions: foreign imported functional foods in Asian emerging country

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to investigate factors that impact consumers' intention of buying foreign-made functional foods. By highlighting various consumer features related to foreign imported functional foods buying behaviours, this study proposed a comprehensive model relating to consumers' purchase intentions in the context of an emerging country. A quantitative study by a self-administrative survey was applied with a sample of 527 respondents from the north of Vietnam. From the results of structural equation modelling analysis, the study discovered that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) information and credibility, health consciousness positively influence consumers' attitude toward foreign functional foods and through attitude influence purchase intention. Interestingly, our results showed that consumer ethnocentrism in the case of foreign imported functional foods, conversely with other products, does not influence either consumer attitude or purchase intentions. The study filled a gap in functional foods consumers' buying behaviour literature in emerging markets by analyzing the mediator role of attitude toward functional foods in the theoretical model of the relation between online information sources and other traditional determinants with purchase intention. From the research results, implications for managers were proposed. Functional food managers should use internet media as a business tool and emphasize the health benefits of functional foods to change consumers' attitudes and then encourage purchase intention.

1. Introduction

Nowadays functional food usage is a significant trend all around the world and the global market for functional foods is progressively increasing (Goetzke *et al.*, 2014; Sagheb *et al.*, 2020). Functional food is regarded as a special kind of food which is satisfactorily demonstrated to affect beneficially one or more target functions in the body, beyond adequate nutritional effects, reduction of risk of disease or/and improved state of health and well-being (Boluda and Capilla, 2017). In recent years, consumers in developing countries are more concerned about the food products that they buy, pay more attention to their health and are more aware of the role of functional foods in their daily nutrition (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019). Understanding why and how customers purchase functional foods is the key success factor for the development of the industry (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Although a considerable number of studies in the field has interested in exploring the purchase intention of consumers related to functional foods, scholars still claimed that the commerce and development of these products are rather expensive and risky, complex, and

special questions still need to be covered (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019; Huang *et al.*, 2020).

Existing literature has highlighted relevant influencing factors including demographics, psychological, situational, and socio-cultural determinants of consumers' purchasing intention. However, through a comprehensive literature review Boluda and Capilla (2017) and Huang *et al.* (2020) indicated that factors influencing purchasing intention of functional foods have been underexplored. In addition, Sagheb *et al.* (2019) argued that there is a need for more studies to identify factors influencing the purchase intention of foreign imported functional food products. A comprehensive model that combined factors would broadly explain the consumer purchasing intention variance, can expand and enrich the literature of the field (Chang *et al.*, 2005; Roudposhti *et al.*, 2018; Nguyen *et al.*, 2019).

The recent and rapid growth of internet technology has dramatically changed the way businesses are

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conducted and has redefined the parameters of consumer behaviours (Bambauer and Mangold, 2011). Literature has identified electronic word of mouth (eWOM), or "between-customer communication" as a probable driver of consumer decision-making (Sun *et al.*, 2020). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is regarded as a negative or positive statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a company or product, which is made available to society via the internet (Bambauer and Mangold, 2011). Consumers look for eWOM before purchasing any product, and 80% of consumers consult online customers' reviews before making purchase decisions (Chang *et al.*, 2005). Literature recognized 2 dimensions of eWOM which can impact customers' purchase intention the use of eWOM information channels and the credibility of this eWOM information (Yusuf *et al.*, 2018).

Research has shown that online reviews have become a key channel for providing information in pre-purchase decisions (Yusuf *et al.*, 2018; Huang *et al.*, 2020). With the fast development of the functional food industry, new food technology and ingredients which are novel to consumers are continuously applied in functional foods production (Goetzke *et al.*, 2014). Consumers who commonly lack relevant professional knowledge of functional foods have to rely on social information sources when making decisions to reduce uncertainty. eWOM is a preferred source of social information to consult.

In addition, according to Yusuf *et al.* (2018), the judgment of the eWOM information credibility is a decisive factor in the information persuasion process. eWOM is different from face-to-face communications, in eWOM, consumers exchange or share information with unknown people on the internet, who have no prior relationship with them (Oraedu *et al.*, 2020). So, if consumers believe that eWOM information is creditable, they will get more confidence to adopt eWOM information and rely on it when thinking of purchasing (Abedi *et al.*, 2019; Huang *et al.*, 2020).

Health consciousness is defined as a person's willingness to undertake healthcare behaviours, and the degree to which health concerns are integrated into daily activities (Kim and Chung, 2011). Health consciousness guides people to put forth efforts to maintain a healthy life and engage in healthy behaviours (Goetzke *et al.*, 2014). Functional foods are believed to decrease the risk of several diseases and also promote health benefits in several essential parts of human physiology. Health consciousness led consumers to consider buying a product that helps them stay safe and healthy, therefore, they may be more seriously concerned about functional foods products than consumers with low health

consciousness (Kim and Chung, 2011). Since consumers are more concerned about their health and their perception that diet directly affects healthiness is spreading, functional foods have played a fundamental role in healthy habits. According to Boluda and Capilla (2017), health is one of the centre variables in the study of consumer behaviour towards functional foods. Nguyen *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that consumers with high health consciousness exhibit a more positive attitude and intention toward functional foods.

Consumer ethnocentrism is consumers' belief in the appropriateness and indeed morality of purchasing and consuming foreign-made products (Nguyen *et al.*, 2008). Consumer ethnocentrism refers to a normative belief that buying foreign goods is less beneficial than buying domestic products (Haque *et al.*, 2015). Ethnocentric consumers believe that purchasing foreign products hurts the domestic economy and increases national unemployment, purchasing foreign-made products is a wrong behaviour (Banna *et al.*, 2018). Consumer ethnocentrism is considered to have an influence on customers' perception of the goods and services offered. In fact, consumer ethnocentrism has a negative effect on the evaluation and customers' purchase intent of foreign products (Mai and Tambyah, 2011). Consumers with strong ethnocentric beliefs evaluate foreign products more negatively than those who do not perceive such beliefs (Sun *et al.*, 2020). Ethnocentric consumers perceive that buying foreign goods is wrong, they also tend to perceive foreign goods have lower quality than domestic goods, they underestimate the attributes of foreign goods and overestimate those of local products. Consumers with high ethnocentrism prefer domestic goods because they think that their domestic products are the best (Haque *et al.*, 2015). Ethnocentric consumers will tend to reject values, symbols and people who are from foreign countries. Nguyen *et al.* (2008) and Banna *et al.* (2018) emphasized that consumer ethnocentrism contributes to a consumer's propensity to avoid buying foreign products in general.

Furthermore, most of the research on consumer behaviour has been conducted in Western contexts (Chang *et al.*, 2005; Kashif *et al.*, 2018). Consumers from different contexts are distinct from each other not only demographically but also economically and culturally (Shukla, 2010). Research conducted in emerging markets has also covered purchase intentions in various product categories, including automobile, wedding industry, consumer electronics, tourism and hotel industry, none have been done on foreign imported functional foods. Vietnam, like China and different from Western countries, has a culture of using foods as a tool for preventing and treating chronic diseases (Nguyen *et*

al., 2019). Foods traditionally were considered as medicine materials and the trend of using foods for getting and staying healthy still continuing (Huang *et al.*, 2020). Functional foods are purposely believed to add benefits beyond nutritional value to reduce disease and improve health. The active components of many functional products derive from foods, which pertain to the Vietnamese culture of using herbal medicines. Therefore, there should be more consumer research needed to be widely conducted in this context. Nguyen *et al.* (2019) also called for more research to explore consumer behaviour in reference to foreign functional foods in emerging markets. Thus, studies on the issue are vital in a promising functional food market like Vietnam.

This research paper was an initial effort to simultaneously examine the combined effect of eWOM and customers' personality (health consciousness, ethnocentrism) on consumer purchase intention of foreign imported functional foods in an emerging market economy. Applying the theory of planned behaviour (Azjen, 1991) the study explores the mediating impact of attitudes on these relationships.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Questionnaire design

All the scales of the model were adapted from literature and measured using 5-point Likert scale from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree". Initially, the questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese and later it was translated back into English with the help of an English native translator, then was pre-tested with a qualitative survey for the accuracy of meaning and translation.

Purchase intention (YD) was measured with three items adapted from (Shukla, (2010), and also used in Abedi *et al.* (2019) study (e.g. "It is likely that I will purchase foreign-made functional foods" "If foreign-made functional foods are available, I buy it"). Health consciousness (SK) was assessed with five items adapted from Kim and Chung (2011) and also used in Huang *et*

al. (2020) research. The adoption of eWoM information (WI) construct is measured by a four-item scale adapted from Bambauer and Mangold (2011) research. Trust in eWoM Information credibility (TW) variable uses the four-items scale adapted from Filieri *et al.* (2015). Attitude (ATT) was measured using three items in accordance with recommendations and praxis (Kraft *et al.*, 2005; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010). Subjects responded to the stem, "Eating functional foods regularly would be ...". Consumer ethnocentrism (VC) construct was measured with five items adapted from Sun *et al.* (2020) (e.g., "Vietnamese should not buy foreign brands, because this hurts Vietnam business and causes unemployment")

2.2 Data collection

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to gather data for the study. A total of 527 responses have been collected. Among these respondents, 58.4% are females, 51.6% of the respondents are at the age lower than 24 years old, 26.6% of them have got married and 51.6% have bachelor's or college degrees. Approximately 39.6% of respondents are students, 19.4% are office workers, 13.9% are farmers, and 27% of them have retired. A total of 25.8% of respondent get a monthly income of over 800 USD, 39.5% has less than 300 USD per month, 17.1% has a level of 500 USD to 800 USD, and 17.6% has a level of 300 USD to 500 USD per month. More important, the majority of the respondents experienced using functional food (72.3%) only 19% have not ever used any foreign functional foods (Table 1).

SPSS version 23 was used for initial analyses and data exploration to confirm the normality of distributions. Cronbach's Alpha and EFA analyses are used to test the reliability and validity of the measurements. Then, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to test measurements and structural equation modelling (SEM) to test hypotheses were applied with AMOS software version 23. Preacher and Hayes test with a 95% confidence interval and the recommended 5,000 bootstraps was used to directly test the

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Variables		N = 527	%
Gender	Male	219	41.6
	Female	308	58.4
Age	< 24	272	51.6
	> 24	255	48.4
Income per month	Very low (< 300 USD)	208	39.5
	Low (300 USD to 500 USD)	93	17.6
	Medium (500 USD to 800 USD)	90	17.1
	High (> 800 USD)	136	25.8
Marital status	Single	387	73.4
	Married	140	26.6

significance of mediation effects.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Measurement assessment

The reliability test with Cronbach's Alpha analysis on each variable shows that all Cronbach's Alpha values of each scale are more than 0.7. All the items have values of Cronbach's Alpha if the Item Deleted of each item is lower value than the scale 's Cronbach's alpha. All constructs meet the acceptable values for the criteria of composite reliability. The test based on scatterplot for normality and KMO – Bartlett's Test shows that data are normal. KMO value is 0.853; cumulative total variance explained 70.162%, Bartlett's value of 0.000 shows the high sensitivity of the test. For all the reflective construct loadings with a minimum of 0.689 reference value, no item had higher loadings in other constructs different from the original scale. The scales are considered as of good validity (Hair *et al.*, 2014). As a result, the consistency and internal reliability of the scales are confirmed (Table 2).

Based on the result of CFA analysis to test assessment of fit between observed data and a prior conceptualized, the goodness of fit is acceptable. The proposed model has CMIN / DF value at 2.132; GFI (goodness of fit index) at 0.922; CFI (comparative fit

index) at 0.959; TLI at 0.952; NFI at 0.927; IFI 0.96, all are higher than the benchmark value 0.90. RMSEA is 0.046. Thus, the results exhibit adequate convergent validity and fit. All CR values of the latent factors in this model are above 0.7, which suggests good reliability (Table 2). The root square of each construct's AVE value is higher than any other construct which correlated to it ensuring for the constructs' discriminant validity and the values of AVE are all well above the cutoff value of 0.414, discriminant validity $MSV < AVE$ ensure the convergent validity of all scales. (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

3.2 Structural Equation Modeling analysis

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) path analysis results are shown in Figure 1 and the hypothesis testing results are summarized in Table 3. 6/9 hypotheses are statistically significant, 3/9 hypotheses are not supported by the research data.

3.3 Discussion

The study predicts that there is a positive relationship between a consumer's cognitive attitude toward purchasing foreign functional foods and purchase intention. The support of this hypothesis is consistent with previous studies such as Sagheb *et al.* (2019), Mai and Tambyah (2011), Chen *et al.* (2016) Kim and Chung (2011). The results provide additional empirical support

Table 2. Measurements assessment.

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR	Component loading
Consumer ethnocentrism (CE)	VC4	00.865	00.534	00.851	0.863
	VC2				0.841
	VC5				0.817
	VC3				0.760
	VC1				0.744
eWOM information (WI)	TM3	00.913	00.730	00.915	0.925
	TM2				0.921
	TM4				0.851
	TM1				0.829
Trust in eWOM information (TW)	TM6	00.883	00.636	00.874	0.898
	TM8				0.871
	TM7				0.870
	TM5				0.755
Purchase intention (PI)	YD2	00.848	00.590	00.851	0.872
	YD3				0.802
	YD1				0.801
	YD4				0.798
Attitude (AT)	ATT1	00.881	00.715	00.883	0.902
	ATT3				0.886
	ATT2				0.862
Health consciousness (HC)	SK4	00.789	00.51	00.778	0.774
	SK5				0.772
	SK1				0.759
	SK3				0.700
	SK2				0.689

Table 3. Summary of hypotheses tests

	Hypothesis	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Attitude	← Health consciousness	0.388	0.092	40.221	***	Support
Attitude	← Consumer ethnocentrism	0.063	0.054	10.169	0.242	Reject
Attitude	← eWOM information	0.139	0.051	20.75	0.006	Support
Attitude	← Trust in eWOM information	0.305	0.07	40.344	***	Support
Purchase intention	← Consumer ethnocentrism	-0.04	0.04	-0.996	0.319	Reject
Purchase intention	← eWOM information	0.213	0.038	50.558	***	Support
Purchase intention	← Trust in eWOM information	0.027	0.053	0.523	0.601	Reject
Purchase intention	← Health consciousness	0.167	0.068	20.436	0.015	Support
Purchase intention	← Attitude	0.432	0.041	100.412	***	Support

to the theoretical framework of the theory of planned behaviour proposed by Ajzen (1991). The consumer who has a favourable rational attitude is prone to form an intention toward buying foreign functional foods products.

eWOM activities in their shopping websites, internet which can educate and provide their customers with positive information in order to change customers' perceptions, and attitude of the foreign functional foods' usefulness.

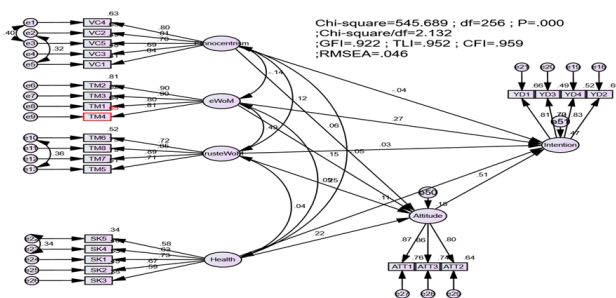


Figure 1. SEM analysis.

The research findings validate the direct and indirect impact of eWOM information on purchase intention (Table 4). The perceived attitude partially mediates the relation between eWOM information and purchase intention of foreign functional foods products. These study findings are consistent with the findings of Cheung and Thadani (2012), Chen *et al.* (2016), Abedi *et al.* (2019), who reported that eWOM in the form of user reviews, testimonials, descriptive sentences or articles written by customers, helpfulness rating, or electronic comments on the Internet, can help customer gaining confidence and conformity of the product, help customers setting their expectation and attitude before making a purchase decision, thus increase their purchase intention. These findings provide empirical evidence supporting the proposal that consumers are more likely to rely on eWOM sources before shopping, they use social information when making their decisions, especially in uncertain situations. These results also provided a strong motivation for companies to improve

The research findings validated the direct and indirect impact of trust in eWOM information on purchase intention. This is in line with Cheung and Thadani (2012), Filieri *et al.* (2015), Huang *et al.* (2020) arguments that if consumers perceive that eWOM posted on the social media platform are credible, the recommendations or reviews from others as believable or true, consumers will consider them useful and relevant in their purchase decision process. Consequently, trustworthy beliefs about eWOM information among consumers impact their buying intentions (Huang *et al.*, 2020). E-marketers need to use the internet as an indispensable business tool to encourage more positive eWOM. Mass media should be used to elicit a remarkable effect on purchase intention. Managers should establish discussion forums, put more emphasis on social networking sites, and use famous and professional users' reviews to attract and gain the credibility of potential customers to increase the level of information credibility which can influence the purchase decision.

The results validate our argument that health consciousness is positively related to customer purchase intention and attitude. Furthermore, the mediator role of attitude in the relationship between health consciousness and repurchase intention was also confirmed. The strong correlation between health consciousness with purchase intention and attitude is consistent with the arguments of

Table 4. Mediation effects with bootstrapping test (two tailed significance 95%).

Path		HC- AT	TW- AT	WI- AT	CE- AT	HC- PI	TW- PI	WI- PI	CE- PI	AT-PI
Direct effect	β	0.218	0.248	0.152	0.058	0.11	0.026	0.274	-0.043	0.506
	Sig.	0.001	0.001	0.027	0.308	0.028	0.655	0.001	0.419	0.001
Indirect effect	β					0.11	0.126	0.077	0.029	0.000
	Sig.					0.001	0.001	0.027	0.309	0.001
Total effect	β	0.218	0.248	0.152	0.058	0.22	0.152	0.351	-0.014	0.506
	Sig.	0.001	0.001	0.027	0.308	0.001	0.011	0.001	0.845	0.001

Kim and Chung (2011), Boluda and Capilla (2017), Nguyen *et al.* (2019) that, health concern is one of the key variables in the research of functional foods consumer behaviour.

This research reports a non-significant impact of consumer ethnocentrism on consumers' purchase intention and attitude toward foreign-made functional foods ($P > 0.05$). This result is consistent with the argument of various scholars, who are concerned that the impact of consumers' ethnocentrism on product evaluations and purchase intention varies across product categories and behavioral contexts (Mai and Tambyah, 2011; Banna *et al.*, 2018). While previous studies with various products, industries, and cultural contexts reported a significant relationship between consumers' ethnocentrism and intention (Mai and Tambyah, 2011; Haque *et al.*, 2015), the relation of the functional food industry in the Vietnam context is not confirmed. The first reason for this inconsistent finding can be explained by Nguyen *et al.* (2008) argument which emphasized that the effect of ethnocentric tendencies is greater with imported products that are perceived as unnecessary than with those that are perceived as necessary. Vietnamese regard functional foods products as important for healthy nutrition, and consumers regard functional foods as a way to improve their health and wellbeing so Vietnamese consumers' ethnocentrism may not be strong enough to influence their buying intention. Moreover, as an emerging and developing country, Vietnam's functional food production is at an early stage of development, so the availability of domestic functional food products is limited in both quantity and quality. Vietnamese consumers hardly find a domestic brand that can be qualified substitute for foreign functional food brands. In the case where the local market does not provide a domestic substitute for a particular product, the effect of ethnocentrism on consumers' attitudes toward foreign products cannot be effective.

4. Conclusion

This study proposes a conceptual framework for identifying factors relating to the purchase intention of foreign-made functional food products in an emerging market. The results reveal that there are positive influences of eWOM information adoption and credibility, and health consciousness on consumers' purchase intention of foreign-made functional food products. Moreover, the results show that attitude toward foreign functional products is proved to be the most significant factor in shaping purchase intention and it also partly mediates the relationship between eWOM information adoption, credibility, health consciousness and consumers' purchase intention. Consumer

ethnocentrism toward foreign-made functional food products in this context has no effect on either consumers' attitudes or purchase intentions.

This study presents limitations. First, limited factors which impact the purchase intentions of consumers of foreign functional food are examined in the conceptual model. The following research should consider more other factors that significantly influence customers' purchase intention. For example, researchers can further investigate other factors related to receivers' characteristics, such as gender, marital status and cognitive personalization affect consumer purchase intention. Second, common method bias in the research methodology suggests that longitudinal studies would be necessary to identify the relationship between factors in this research with actual buying behaviours. Future research in different contexts, in different products or cross-cultural studies, should be done to generalize and deepen our understanding of the impact of consumer ethnocentrism on consumers' behaviour.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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