



## Promoting preventive health behaviour among young Malaysian consumers: toward an integrated conceptual framework

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### ABSTRACT

Research aimed at uncovering the motives for the use of dietary supplements among young consumers is of both marketing and public policy importance, and thus deserving of research effort. This research addresses this important health issue from a consumer research perspective, as it is believed that the ultimate responsibility for health maintenance rests with the individual. Drawing on the theory of planned behaviour, this research developed an integrated model to explain dietary supplement consumption, by incorporating a comprehensive set of consumer characteristics. Data were collected using a cross-sectional survey of 438 undergraduate students in Malaysia. Structural equation modelling was used to assess the hypothesised relationships. Findings reveal that health consciousness, health motivation and health value account for significant additional variance, suggesting the particular relevance of these consumer characteristics, in addition to social cognitive factors, in explaining dietary supplement use. This research contributes to marketing theory and practice as well as public health policy formulation.

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### CHINESE ABSTRACT

了解年轻消费者使用膳食补充剂的动机，对市场营销和公共保健政策都有重要意义，因此值得对此研究。本文从消费者研究角度出发，探讨此重要健康问题，作者相信维护健康的最终责任在于个人。本文借鉴计划行为理论，通过全面分析消费者的特征，建立一个综合模型，来解释膳食补充剂的消费行为。文中采用横断面调查研究方法采集数据，对马来西亚438名本科生进行了问卷调查，并采用结构方程模型来验证假设关系。研究结果表明，健康意识、健康动机和健康价值观有显著的额外差异，说明除了社会认知因素外，这些消费者的消费特性与其使用膳食补充剂有着特定的关联。本文研究成果对市场营销理论和实践以及公共健康政策的制定都有借鉴意义。

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## 1. Introduction

The health care issues relating to increased chronic diseases, lower life expectancy and escalating health care costs are prevalent worldwide, from developing nations to the industrialised society. An unhealthy population has implications for public health care spending, taxes, and it affects not only the personal state of health of citizens, but also the overall economic competitiveness of a nation (Brennan et al., 2010). In particular, health interventions are essential to improve nutrition decision among young consumers, as dietary habits in adolescence are likely to persist as they transit to

adulthood (Kelder et al., 1994; Birch and Fisher, 1998). The health condition of young adults is of public policy importance, in view of the importance of health as an asset in the development of human capital. Furthermore, as young adults are our future social opinion leaders, their beliefs and attitudes may be influential in shaping community norms and values towards health (Leslie et al., 2001). However, it is challenging to persuade young consumers who are feeling healthy to engage in preventive health behaviour, when the benefits of doing so are perceived to be so distant. This research is conducted in the belief that this short-term view can be altered through changing the underlying consumer behaviour of such young people.

The growing awareness of evidence linking nutrition with health has led many consumers to embrace self-treatment with dietary supplements, aimed at strengthening their immune system and

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preventing disease (Rajamma and Pelton, 2010; Ren et al., 2011). This trend of health and well-being has driven the recent popularity of dietary supplements in Malaysia. The business potential for health-related offerings such as over-the-counter (OTC) drugs, vitamins and dietary supplements has increased to a sizeable market with strong growth (Euromonitor, 2010). Expenditure on health products and medical services in Malaysia increased by more than 231% in 2006 alone, reaching RM8.4 billion in 2007 (Euromonitor, 2009). Thus the appropriate use of health supplements has obvious importance in terms of health and well-being, and also in terms of market opportunities and even national health policy. There is a body of research about dietary supplement consumption, but there is a gap in the literature concerning the motives for the use of supplements among young consumers – this gap provides a focus for this research.

The initial debate surrounding dietary supplement consumption has primarily revolved around the economic considerations (Kemp and Moyer, 1974; Horvitz et al., 1975), and pharmacists' and physicians' attitudes and behaviours pertaining to generic drugs (Myers and Fink, 1971; McCormick and Hammel, 1972). With the substantial growth of the dietary supplements market, issues relating to consumer protection next become an area of concern (Nocella and Kennedy, 2012). Scholars have examined how consumers process health claims and have studied consumers' responses to information regulation (Crawford and Leventis, 2005; France and Bone, 2005; Mason and Scammon, 2011), as well as the amendment of regulation and its effect on consumer belief systems (Vladeck, 2000; Dodge et al., 2011).

Overall, the research direction in this topic has largely focused on user profiling (de Jong et al., 2003; Ishihara et al., 2003): socio-demographic and/or lifestyle related determinants of dietary supplement intake (Nayga and Reed, 1999; Jasti et al., 2003) and the consumption patterns of supplement users (Okleshen Peters et al., 2003). However, these socio-demographic and lifestyle variables provide only descriptive information and do not explain why consumers do (or do not) consume dietary supplements.

This study extends research on preventive health behaviour in several ways. The research aims to develop an integrated model to explain dietary supplement consumption, by incorporating a comprehensive set of consumer characteristics within an extended theory of planned behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) framework. Understanding how such consumer characteristics and social cognition factors explain consumer attitude, and consumers' responses to the consumption of dietary supplements, is a primary step in the formulation and implementation of marketing strategies that can benefit various stakeholders in the health care and pharmaceutical industry. In a large part, past preventive health studies have drawn conclusion mainly from nutrition, preventive medicine, health science, public health, and health psychology perspectives. Departing from this tradition, this research addresses this important health issue from a consumer research perspective, as it is believed that the ultimate responsibility for health maintenance rests with the individual (Bloch, 1984).

Lastly, the health and wellness notion has become deeply rooted in the Western society. However, Malaysia's current preventive health care system has not been as successful as many Western counterparts. Despite its potential marketing and public policy importance, consumers' dietary supplement consumption behaviour has received limited academic attention in Malaysia. This study adds to the literature in yet another way, by investigating the extent to which selected determinants that drive dietary supplement consumption in Western countries hold true in Eastern nations.

The next section of this paper begins with the theoretical background to the study. This is followed by a description of the research design and the results. The paper concludes with a discussion of

the empirical findings and the managerial implications derived from this research.

## 2. Theoretical background

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB, Ajzen and Madden, 1986) is used as the basic frame for the study. The TPB posits that one's behavioural intention (which reflects the amount of effort a person exerts to engage in a given behaviour) is determined independently by attitude toward the behaviour along with social norms and perceived behavioural control (PBC). Although the TPB has been widely used to explain food consumption behaviours (Armitage and Conner, 2001; Jeong et al., 2012), the original TPB motivational drivers of attitudinal, social and control factors may not adequately capture the possible motivations behind the complex nature of health-related consumer behaviour.

Drawing from the health belief model, Jayanti and Burns (1998) find that health motivation, health consciousness, health knowledge and health value are all associated with preventive health care behaviour. It follows that the same factors have an effect on dietary supplement consumption practices (Iverson and Kraft, 2006). Nevertheless, a high level of consciousness of good health may not explain health behaviour adequately of itself (Smith and Paladino, 2010). Others argue that people's personal health values and their goal-directed arousal that drives him or her to engage in health preventive practices may also be important in explaining dietary supplement consumption (Moorman and Matulich, 1993; Shi et al., 2004). In addition, health knowledge is also a relevant concept, since consumers' information processing and decision-making are subject to their knowledge level (Moorman and Matulich, 1993). Past health studies that examine these four factors are found mainly in the Western context of organic food consumption (e.g., Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Chen, 2009; Cerjak et al., 2010; Pieniak et al., 2010), and their role in explaining dietary supplement consumption still awaits empirical validation.

Moorman and Matulich (1993) suggest that the limited attention given to investigation of health behaviours from the consumer research perspective may be attributable to the lack of comprehensive models to explain consumers' health behaviours. In this respect they coined the term "consumer characteristics," which they conceptualise as either a health motivation or a health ability, and we adopt this useful categorisation and hereafter term health consciousness, health motivation, health value and health knowledge as consumer characteristics (Moorman and Matulich, 1993, p. 208). In this research we add consumer characteristics to the traditional formulation of the TPB in order to better explain preventive health behaviour.

While the social norm construct contained in the original TPB model captures only the normative influence component, this model posits that social influence takes place in two main ways; first, by providing information in ambiguous situations (i.e., informational influence) and also by setting normative standards of conduct (i.e., normative influence, Bearden et al., 1989; Mangleburg et al., 2004). A conceptual model is developed based on the premise that consumers' intention to consume dietary supplement is determined by attitude and the four consumer characteristics along with social influence and PBC (see Fig. 1). The research hypotheses related to the operationalisation of the conceptual model are discussed next.

## 3. Hypotheses development

Hypotheses are developed below for each of the items, under the sub-categories of consumer characteristics and the aspects of the TPB, in order to operationalise the conceptual model. The research hypotheses related to the conceptual model are discussed next.

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