

Overweight Consumers' Salient Beliefs on Omega-3–Enriched Functional Foods in Australia's Illawarra Region

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine consumer salient beliefs toward functional foods enriched with omega-3 fatty acids.

Design: Focus group interviews with adult consumers using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a theoretical framework.

Setting: Community-based residents living in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, Australia.

Participants: Forty-two overweight participants (29 female, 13 male) aged 30 to 80 years recruited by advertisement and attending 1 of 6 focus groups, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis: Content analysis was carried out, and subcategories were developed to capture the emerging themes according to the TPB model.

Results: Most participants were aware of a range of potential benefits of omega-3 fatty acids, but they had reservations about the ability of omega-3–enriched foods to deliver a health benefit. They were concerned about whether these foods were labeled clearly and about the possibility of overdosing. Family and friends were viewed as important in introducing participants to novel foods on the market. Participants regarded dietitians as a credible source and were least trusting of food companies and scientists. Overall, participants reported that cost was a major barrier, and that they would not necessarily trade taste for health benefits. Adding omega-3 fatty acids to foods regarded as less healthful was viewed more as a gimmick rather than a real health benefit.

Conclusions and Implications: The consumer attitudes and purchase intentions identified in this study will be helpful to educators as they plan messages and strategies to guide dietary choices related to products enriched with omega-3 fatty acids.

KEY WORDS: salient beliefs, functional foods, focus group, qualitative studies, omega-3 fats, health claims

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INTRODUCTION

There is a considerable body of evidence showing the beneficial effects of marine-based omega-3 fatty acids on human health.¹ Unfortunately, a large portion of the population is unable to consume enough of this essential nutrient from fish alone.² Emerging nutrition science and food technology, combined with growing consumer interest in health and well-being, has led to the development and marketing of omega-3–enriched foods such as bread, milk, and eggs, which are referred to as functional foods. Not only have consumers heard of these and other enriched foods, but 50% of US adults believe that the associated claims about their health benefits are true.³ In addition, consumers are demanding more information on how to achieve better health through their diet.⁴ A study in the US found that 95% of the population believed that food possessed the potential to improve health by doing more than just providing nutrients.⁵

Although the British Nutrition Foundation and American Dietetic Association define functional food as “a food having health promoting benefits and/or disease preventing properties over and above its usual nutritional value,”^{6,7} there is no universally accepted definition. Functional foods seem to fall into a gray area, somewhere between foods and medicines, with the precise boundaries on either side far from clear.⁸ This is more than just a theoretical concern. From the viewpoint of nutrition education, the functional food category does not fit straightforwardly into any of the long-established food educational models, and there are concerns relating to consumer acceptability and perception.⁶ With evidence showing that food choice affects dietary quality as measured by intake,^{9,10} it seems appropriate that greater attention be given to the factors that facilitate or constrain the use of functional foods.

The field of cognitive psychology suggests that the best predictor of human behavior is a person's conscious decision

to perform the behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a model that can help explain consumers' purchase intentions to use functional food products. According to the TPB, a person's behavioral intention is determined by the attitude the person holds toward the behavior, the degree of social pressure felt by the person to perform or not perform the behavior, and the degree of control that the person feels over performing the behavior.¹¹ These 3 factors, in turn, are determined by a number of beliefs and subsequently how each is evaluated. It has been demonstrated that the TPB, or modified versions of it, is applicable in explaining consumers' food choice,¹²⁻¹⁴ including supplement use¹⁵ and genetically modified products.¹⁶ However, to date, this model has not been applied to understanding consumer behavior regarding the use of functional food products.

Focus groups can be used to access a diverse range of opinions and viewpoints and determine salient beliefs. A focus group discussion is defined as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment."¹⁷ This approach is suggested by Ajzen and Fishbein as the method of choice to determine salient beliefs about the topic area of interest.¹¹ In the present study, the utility of the method was strengthened by focusing on specific products rather than investigating functional food products in general.¹¹ In addition, consumers' attitude toward functional food could be expected to be influenced by general attitudes such as the attitude toward technology or food neophobia,¹⁸ beliefs about the production process, perceived healthiness,¹⁹ and beliefs about the quality of the resulting product. This is particularly relevant because the range of omega-3 functional foods entering the marketplace is increasing.

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the salient beliefs underlying participants' attitudes and purchase intentions with regard to omega-3-enriched functional foods. Using focus group discussions, consumer beliefs and attitudes were determined for the purpose of developing a survey instrument to test the generalizability of these opinions in a larger population sample.

METHODS

Focus group interviews examining salient beliefs and attitudes regarding functional foods were conducted with a cross-section of adult consumers in the Illawarra region of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Compared with the NSW average, the population residing in the Illawarra is more socially disadvantaged, and hospitalization rates from coronary heart disease in the Illawarra were 20% higher in men and 14% higher in women than the state average in 2001.²⁰ The study employed a qualitative research design, with overweight participants recruited. This group reflects a potential target population for functional foods enriched with omega-3 fatty acids because people from this region of Australia have a relatively high risk of cardiovascular disease.²⁰

Participants

Participants were recruited through general advertising in local media. Fifty potential participants expressed an interest in the study, and all were invited to attend 1 of 6 focus group discussions. An information sheet and a consent form were mailed to each potential participant. Each participant was offered a small payment (AUS\$20) to offset any inconvenience that might have resulted from involvement in the study. Approval for the conduct of the study was provided by the University of Wollongong/Illawarra Area Health Service Human Research Ethics Committee.

Focus Group Procedure

The focus groups were conducted between July and August 2002. All groups were conducted in a community center located in the Illawarra region. Focus groups were audiotaped and the tapes transcribed to allow systematic analysis of the discussion. Each focus group ran for approximately 1 hour and was conducted by a moderator and an observer. To ensure consistency between the groups, the same trained moderator ran each group, and all groups were monitored by an independent observer for quality assurance purposes.¹⁷ An interview guide was developed by the research team (C.S.P., L.C.T., P.G.W.) following the general guidelines provided by Krueger.¹⁷ Using the TPB theoretical framework, 10 questions were devised to determine consumer awareness, beliefs, attitudes, and barriers to using functional foods enriched with or providing omega-3 fatty acids. The interview guide was pretested using undergraduate nutrition students and review by the research team. At the beginning of each session, instructions were provided to the group, the purpose of the interview was outlined, and it was emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers. During the sessions, participants were encouraged to speak until no more views were expressed, and then the moderator probed and clarified points. In short, probes were primarily used to encourage participants to clarify meanings or explain points of incongruence in their answers. To introduce the concept of functional food, sample products were provided as prompts for discussion (questions 1-5): Flora's pro-activ and Meadow Lea's Logicol (margarines with added plant sterols), Yakult's fermented milk drink (a probiotic beverage), and Buttercup's Wonder White bread (with high-amylose-resistant starch). Specific omega-3-enriched food products were used as prompts for discussion (questions 6-10): Tip Top's Up bread and Meadow Lea's Hi Omega margarine (both enriched with omega-3 fatty acids).

Data Analysis

Each focus group discussion was tape-recorded and transcribed, producing, on average, 30 pages of transcript. A computer software package for qualitative analysis, NVivo 2.0 (QSR International Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia, 2002), was used for data management and coding.²¹ Using the TPB

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