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ARTICLE

Consumer attitudes in the election of functional foods

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract In recent years, the rise of functional foods has played a key role in healthy habits, due to growing consumer concern about health and the perception that diet directly affects healthiness. The objective of this work is to study how consumer attitudes influence the choice and consumption of functional foods in Spain. For this purpose, a proposed model is adapted to the field of study, integrating different models and theories. These theories have achieved broad support in the literature. With a sample of 333 consumers, we can conclude that consumer attitudes towards functional foods have a direct influence on the willingness to consume them. A healthy lifestyle has no effect on these attitudes, but lifestyle influences the willingness to use functional foods in a negative manner. We can also determine that certain motivators and barriers positively influence the healthy lifestyle. At the same time, the paper tries to analyze the moderating role of gender, and some differences between men and women are found.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Actitudes;
Consumo de
alimentos
funcionales;
Estilo de vida
saludable;
Diferencias de género

La actitud del consumidor en la elección de alimentos funcionales

Resumen Recientemente, el auge de los alimentos funcionales ha tenido un papel fundamental en los hábitos saludables, debido a la creciente preocupación del consumidor por la salud y la percepción de que la alimentación influye directamente en ella. El objetivo de este trabajo es estudiar cómo influyen las actitudes del consumidor en la elección de compra y consumo de alimentos funcionales en España. Se plantea un modelo integrado por diversas teorías que han conseguido amplio respaldo en la literatura. Con una muestra de 333 consumidores, podemos concluir que las actitudes de los consumidores hacia los alimentos funcionales afectan, de manera directa, la voluntad de consumo. El estilo de vida saludable no influye en estas actitudes

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hacia los alimentos funcionales, sin embargo, este estilo de vida saludable sí lo hace negativamente en la voluntad de consumo de estos alimentos. Asimismo, ciertos motivadores y barreras afectan al estilo de vida saludable. Al mismo tiempo, se intenta analizar el papel moderador del género y se encuentran algunas diferencias entre hombres y mujeres.

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Introduction

The World Health Organization has defined obesity as the epidemic of the 21st Century. Dietary problems have a major impact on chronic diseases, health care costs, quality of life and public health (World Health Organization, 2000). In Spain, the rate of obesity in Spanish adults is higher than the OECD average and, in the case of children, this rate is among the highest in the OECD (Sassy, 2011).

For these reasons, the consumption of functional foods has proliferated in recent years. According to The International Life Sciences Institute (Ashwell, 2004), functional foods are those that include a variety of relevant components to improve health status or reduce the risk (non-prevention) of the disease. Those foods also must bring benefits beyond those of basic nutrition. For example, foods that are low in fats and sugars or incorporated fiber, among others, are functional foods. For a food to be classified as functional, its health properties must be supported by scientific evidence (Ashwell, 2004). According to Baboota et al. (2013), the functional ingredients are promising for the treatment of obesity and associated comorbidities, surpassing even the benefits of medication.

Consumers view food as a way to improve their health and wellbeing, and manufacturers are responding proactively by offering new products that meet these needs (Gray, Armstrong, & Farley, 2003). Many consumers fail to pay attention to nutritional values and calories when foods are shown as healthy, even if they are not (Chandon & Wansink, 2007); this confirms the importance that food needs to indicate in some way that is helping to maintain the consumer health.

Thus, according to Menrad (2003), functional foods came to the European market in the mid-1990s. The United States, in the early 2000s, represented the 50% of functional foods in the world (Menrad, 2003). According to this author, functional foods offer interesting growth opportunities for the food industry, but the specific efforts of different stakeholder groups (scientists, food ingredient suppliers, food industry companies, and food retailers) need to take advantage of these opportunities in the future. This market continues to grow steadily in Europe, with marked differences in the attitudes of consumers to functional food according to their country of origin (Özen, del Mar Bibiloni, Pons, & Tur, 2014). Özen et al. (2014) indicate that, in recent years, the consumption of functional foods in Europe has been extended. Some consumers do not know how to categorize these products correctly, which may mark a decline in the interest of functional foods (Granqvist & Ritvala, 2016).

In this context, it is interesting to be able to explain the consumer behavior that chooses these products in order to be successful in product development and marketing strategies (Urala & Lähteenmäki, 2003).

Bhaskaran and Hardley (2002) conclude that functional products, as a relatively new phenomenon, have yet to be studied in greater depth with regard to consumer behavior. In the same way, Özen, Pons, and Tur (2012) argue that it is not possible to reach generalized conclusions about the consumer in relation to functional foods and that we need further studies. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that the investigations carried out from the point of view of marketing in the study of the purchase and consumption of this type of food are still incipient.

Several studies indicate gender differences: these differences in dietary choices seem to be attributed to women's greater participation in weight control, and to the fact that they give more value than men do to healthy eating (Wardle et al., 2004).

Therefore, the objective of this work lies in the study of the attitude of the consumer towards the purchase and consumption of functional foods. Specifically, there are three specific objectives. First, analyze how the consumer's attitude towards functional foods influences the willingness of consumption. Second, discover how healthy lifestyle and health concern influences these attitudes toward functional foods and, therefore, the willingness to consume them. Finally, study which variables motivate or restrict this healthy lifestyle. In addition, the role of gender in the choice of functional foods is studied. The realization of this research adds value to previous studies as justified below.

It should be noted that, according to Figueroa and Sánchez (2004), health is one of the main variables in the study of consumer behavior towards functional foods. Consumers show more positive products attitudes and increase the intention to buy them when these are presented as healthy and have favorable nutritional information (Kozup, Creyer, & Burton, 2003). Despite negative consumer perceptions of transgenic foods, functional foods, which maintain the health benefits of those who consume them, are generally perceived as positive. Therefore, it emphasizes the importance of the correct communication of these positive health effects (Van Kleef, van Trijp, & Luning, 2005). In this framework and in the study on functional foods in the Spanish market, Figueroa and Sánchez (2004) conclude that health and safety are the most relevant aspects for the consumer when choosing functional foods. Consumers of these foods say

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