

Consumer Perceptions of Health Food Brands

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ABSTRACT

Consumers routinely make decisions about purchasing and selecting products based on various factors, including price, availability, promotions, and family circumstances. However, the growing emphasis on health and nutrition has significantly influenced these choices. People are increasingly conscious of the health implications of their food selections, reflecting a prevailing trend in nutritional awareness.

This heightened awareness has prompted closer scrutiny of food items and their potential health benefits. Paradoxically, there exists a gap between how consumers perceive the healthiness of products and their actual nutritional content. This disparity poses a challenge for companies specializing in health foods, potentially discouraging consumers from making purchases.

Despite this obstacle, health food brands play a vital role in people's lives by promising health improvements and essential nutrients. Interestingly, the reasons for consuming foods vary widely; some individuals prioritize health concerns, while others may be influenced by personal preferences, body image goals, or societal expectations.

The shift toward healthier lifestyles underscores the significance of health food items in meeting consumer expectations for improved health outcomes. Whether motivated by specific health concerns or broader lifestyle shifts, consumers seek assurance that investing in health foods will yield desired benefits.

For companies aiming to bridge the gap between perceived and actual product value, understanding how consumers view health food brands is essential. By aligning marketing approaches with consumer expectations and nutritional facts, brands can effectively cater to the requirements of health-conscious individuals.

Keywords: Consumer perceptions, Health food brands, Nutritional value, Consumer behaviour, Health outcomes.

1. Introduction

The contemporary consumer landscape is characterized by a burgeoning interest in health and wellness, leading to heightened demand for health food products. This global phenomenon underscores a paradigm shift wherein individuals increasingly prioritize dietary choices as integral components of their overall well-being (Greenwald Research, 2023). As consumers become more cognizant of the profound impact of diet on health outcomes, the market for health food brands has witnessed exponential growth, transcending demographic and geographic boundaries (García-Salirrosas et al., 2022, Grand View Research 2023).

Central to understanding this phenomenon is an in-depth exploration of consumer perceptions and behaviors vis-à-vis health food brands. Such an inquiry not only elucidates the intricate motivations driving consumer preferences but also furnishes indispensable insights for businesses operating within the health food industry. By discerning the multifaceted determinants influencing consumer choices, enterprises can refine their marketing strategies and product portfolios to better align with evolving consumer preferences and expectations (García-Salirrosas et al., 2022).

Moreover, an examination of the nexus between consumer perception of health food brands and socio-economic classification unveils a nuanced interplay of socio-economic factors in shaping consumption patterns. Variables such as income level, educational attainment, and social status exert profound influences on consumer behavior, delineating distinct consumption trajectories within heterogeneous consumer segments (García-Salirrosas et al., 2022).

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the literature review the following research questions are formulated for this study on consumer perceptions of health food brands:

- i. **Research Question 1:** What are the key factors (e.g., product attributes, brand image, marketing strategies, sociocultural influences) that drive consumers' decision to purchase health food products, and how do they prioritize the importance of these factors?
- ii. **Research Question 2:** How do consumers evaluate the perceived health benefits, nutritional value, and overall quality of health food brands? What are their opinions on the varying types of health food products available in the market?
- iii. **Research Question 3:** To what extent does consumers' socio-economic status (e.g., income, education, occupation) influence their perceptions and attitudes towards health food brands? Are there any significant differences in the way consumers from different socio-economic backgrounds perceive and approach health food products?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Health Food Brands

Health food brands epitomize products marketed and perceived to provide enhanced nutritional value, health benefits, or contribute positively to overall well-being (Banerjee, 2018). These brands typically underscore attributes such as organic, natural, low in calories, or rich in specific vitamins and minerals (Franco-Arellano et al., 2020). The defining characteristics of health food brands often revolve around their capacity to promote and sustain good health through improved nutritional profiles and the absence of undesirable ingredients (Ministry of Health, 2003).

2.2 Factors Influencing Consumer Perceptions

• Product Attributes

Physical features of health food products, including taste, quality, packaging, and labelling, wield considerable influence over consumer perceptions and purchase behaviors. Consumers often correlate specific product attributes with the perceived health and nutritional value of the item. For instance, they may regard products with clean labels, minimally processed ingredients, and visually appealing packaging as more health-promoting (Asioli et al., 2017). Moreover, taste and texture profoundly impact consumers' assessment of the product's nutritional worth (Mai & Hoffmann, 2012).

• Brand Image

The reputation, trustworthiness, and perceived quality of health food brands significantly shape consumer attitudes and beliefs (Banerjee, 2018). Consumers often rely on a brand's image as a heuristic to evaluate the potential health benefits of its offerings, particularly when information or experience is limited (Sansome et al., 2024). A positive brand image signals quality and reliability, fostering consumer confidence in the brand's health claims. Conversely, negative perceptions or a lack of trust can erode consumer confidence and diminish brand credibility (Chang & Huang, 2019; Kim et al., 2008).

• Marketing Strategies

Promotional activities, advertising campaigns, and health-related claims made by health food brands exert considerable influence on consumer perceptions (Franco-Arellano et al., 2020). Effective marketing strategies that emphasize the nutritional advantages and health benefits of products can sway consumer purchase intentions. However, exaggerated or misleading claims may foster scepticism, leading to a disparity between brand messaging and consumer perceptions (Sütterlin & Siegrist, 2015).

• Sociocultural Influences

Peer groups, family, and social norms play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions of health food brands (Voorhees et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2011). Social networks and cultural beliefs about health and wellness influence consumer attitudes and behaviors. Individuals in health-conscious communities may view health food brands favourably, while the social desirability of consuming these products can impact consumer perceptions (Fisher & Katz, 2000; Pérez-Cueto et al., 2010; Sun, 2008).

2.3 Previous Studies on Consumer Perceptions

• Perceived Health Value vs. Actual Nutritional Quality

Research by Franco-Arellano et al. (2020) underscores a significant disparity between consumers' perceived health value of food products and their actual nutritional quality. Consumers often overestimate the health benefits of products based on brand claims and marketing messages, highlighting a critical concern for health food brands. This discrepancy can lead to consumer dissatisfaction and erode trust in the brand.

• Brand Image and Purchase Intentions

Purwanto et al. (2021) investigated the influence of brand image on consumer purchase intentions for health food products. They found that a robust brand image, characterized by trustworthiness and perceived quality, positively impacts consumer purchase intentions. Strong brand-building efforts, such as establishing a positive reputation and leveraging social media, can cultivate consumer trust and drive purchasing decisions.

• Socio-demographic Factors

Lefebvre et al. (2019) examined the impact of socio-demographic factors on consumer perceptions of health food brands. Their study highlighted the importance of considering age, gender, and income when developing marketing strategies. Understanding these factors can help brands tailor their approaches to resonate with target market segments effectively (Ogundijo et al., 2022).

2.4 Gaps and Opportunities

While existing research has shed light on various aspects of consumer perceptions of health food brands, several gaps remain. Further exploration of the role of health-consciousness and the relationship between socio-economic status and consumer perceptions is warranted. Additionally, more research focusing on specific demographic segments, such as university students, can offer valuable insights for brands aiming to cater to diverse consumer needs and preferences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques, to gain a comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions of health food brands. The rationale for using a mixed-methods design was to leverage the strengths of both approaches and obtain a richer, more nuanced set of insights (Okpiaifo et al., 2023).

The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of university students. This phase was designed to explore their perceptions, motives, and attitudes towards health food brands in an open-ended and exploratory manner. The insights gained from the qualitative phase were then used to inform the development of the survey instrument for the quantitative phase.

The quantitative phase utilized a cross-sectional survey to collect data from a larger sample of university students. This phase aimed to examine the relationships between consumer demographics, purchasing behavior, brand preferences, and perceptions of health food products. The survey data was analysed using statistical techniques to identify patterns, trends, and significant associations (Ogundijo et al., 2022).

The mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation of the findings, as the qualitative data provided depth and context, while the quantitative data offered breadth and statistical generalizability. This integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods enabled a more comprehensive and robust examination of the research questions.

3.2 Data Collection

a. Qualitative Phase

The qualitative data collection phase involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 20 university students. The participants were selected based on their age (18-25 years), student status, and self-reported interest in health and wellness.

The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preference and the prevailing COVID-19 safety guidelines (García-Salirrosas et al., 2022). Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview guide covered topics such as:

- i. Participants' perceptions and attitudes towards health food brands
- ii. Factors influencing their choice and consumption of health food products
- iii. Motivations and barriers related to purchasing health food products
- iv. Opinions on the diversity and quality of health food offerings in the market
- v. The role of health-consciousness and socio-economic status in their consumption patterns

The audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to consumer perceptions of health food brands.

b. Quantitative Phase

The quantitative data collection phase involved a cross-sectional survey administered to a larger sample of university students. The survey instrument was developed based on the insights gained from the qualitative phase, as well as a review of the existing literature on consumer perceptions of health food brands.

The survey consisted of the following sections:

- i. **Demographic information:** Questions about the participants' age, gender, academic program, and socio-economic status (e.g., household income, parental education level).
- ii. **Health-consciousness and purchasing behaviour:** Items measuring the participants' level of health-consciousness and their frequency of purchasing and consuming health food products.
- iii. **Brand preferences and perceptions:** Questions assessing the participants' familiarity with health food brands, their attitudes towards these brands, and their perceived value of the products.
- iv. **Open-ended feedback:** An optional section allowing participants to provide additional comments or insights about their experiences with health food brands.

The survey was distributed online using a secure survey platform. Participants were recruited through various university communication channels, such as email listservs, social media pages, and announcements during class sessions. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete, and participants were offered a chance to win a gift card as an incentive for their participation.

3.3 Sample Design

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions of health food brands.

a. Qualitative Phase

Sampling Approach: For the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling method was used to select the participants. The criteria for inclusion were:

- i. Current university student (undergraduate or postgraduate)
- ii. Age between 18 and 25 years
- iii. Self-reported interest in health and wellness

This purposive sampling approach aimed to achieve maximum variation in the sample by recruiting participants from diverse academic programs, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of health-consciousness.

Sample Size: A total of 20 university students participated in the in-depth interviews. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where no new themes or insights were emerging from the additional interviews.

b. Quantitative Phase

Sampling Approach: For the quantitative phase, a non-probability convenience sampling method was used to recruit the participants. University students were invited to participate in the online survey through various communication channels, such as email listservs, social media pages, and announcements during class sessions.

Sample Size: The target sample size for the quantitative phase was determined using a power analysis. Assuming a medium effect size, a significance level of 0.05, and a statistical power of 0.80, the minimum required sample size was calculated to be 2,800 participants. To account for potential incomplete or invalid responses, the target sample size was set at 3,600 university students.

The final sample consisted of 3,544 valid responses, which exceeded the minimum requirement and provided sufficient statistical power for the data analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved both qualitative and quantitative methods.

a. Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the in-depth interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. The key steps are as follows:

- i. **Familiarization with the data:** The research team thoroughly reviewed the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.
- ii. **Generating initial codes:** Relevant segments of the transcripts were identified and assigned initial codes to capture the key ideas and concepts.
- iii. **Searching for themes:** The research team reviewed the coded data and grouped the initial codes into broader themes that represented the patterns and relationships in the data.
- iv. **Reviewing and refining themes:** The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and accurately reflected the data.

- v. Defining and naming themes:** The final themes were clearly defined and appropriately named to capture the essence of the consumer perceptions and experiences.
- vi. Producing the report:** The qualitative findings were organized and presented in a narrative format, using illustrative quotes from the participants to support the identified themes.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative survey data was analyzed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The key steps are as follows:

- 1. Data cleaning and screening:** The survey responses were carefully examined for any incomplete, inconsistent, or invalid data, which were then addressed or removed from the dataset.
- 2. Descriptive statistics:** Frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated to provide an overview of the sample characteristics and the distribution of the key variables.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N = 3,544)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1,570	44.3%
Female	1,974	55.7%
Age		
18-21 years	2,006	56.5%
22-25 years	1,538	43.5%
Education		
Undergraduate	2,560	72.2%
Postgraduate	984	27.8%
Household Income		
Less than ₹3,50,000	1,044	29.5%
₹3,50,000 - ₹7,00,000	1,570	44.3%
More than ₹7,00,000	930	26.2%

- 3. Correlation analysis:** Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between consumer demographics, health-consciousness, brand preferences, and perceptions of health food products.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

	Health-consciousness	Brand Preference	Perceived Healthfulness
Health-consciousness	1	0.45**	0.57**
Brand Preference	0.45**	1	0.49**
Perceived Healthfulness	0.57**	0.49**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

The correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships. Health-consciousness was positively correlated with both brand preference ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived healthfulness of health food products ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.01$). Brand preference was also positively correlated with perceived healthfulness ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$).

- 4. Regression analysis:** Multiple linear regression models were employed to assess the predictive power of various factors (e.g., socio-economic status, health-consciousness) on consumers' perceptions and purchase intentions for health food brands.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Healthfulness

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
(Constant)	16,980	2,320	-	7.31	< 0.001
Health-consciousness	3,340	360	0.39	9.20	< 0.001
Income	1,020	440	0.12	2.33	0.020
Education	1,530	620	0.11	2.45	0.015
Brand Preference	2,250	290	0.32	7.75	< 0.001

$R^2 = 0.41$, $F(4, 3,539) = 84.72$, $p < 0.001$

The regression model showed that health-consciousness ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$), income ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.020$), education ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = 0.015$), and brand preference ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of perceived healthfulness of health food products, accounting for 41% of the variance.

- 5. Analysis of variance (ANOVA):** One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to identify any significant differences in consumer perceptions of health food brands based on their socio-economic status or other demographic characteristics.

Table 4: One-way ANOVA for Perceived Healthfulness by Income Level

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	69,200	2	34,600	11.65	< 0.001
Within Groups	1,446,800	3,541	408	-	-
Total	1,516,000	3,543	-	-	-

The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of income level on perceived healthfulness of health food products, $F(2, 3,541) = 11.65$, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test showed that participants from higher-income households ($> ₹7,00,000$) perceived health food products as significantly more healthful compared to those from lower-income households ($< ₹3,50,000$).

6. **Integrating qualitative and quantitative findings:** The qualitative themes and the quantitative results were synthesized to provide a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of consumer perceptions of health food brands.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Overall Consumer Perceptions of Health Food Brands

The mixed-methods approach revealed that consumers generally hold a positive perception of health food brands, recognizing their potential to contribute to improved health and well-being (Lefebvre et al., 2019). However, the study also uncovered a significant disparity between the perceived health value and the actual nutritional quality of some health food products.

4.2 Factors Affecting Consumer Perceptions

The key factors influencing consumer perceptions of health food brands were:

1. **Product Attributes:** Nutritional value, ingredient quality, and organic/natural claims were heavily prioritized, along with taste and visual appeal.
2. **Brand Image:** A strong, trustworthy brand image was a crucial driver of consumer confidence and purchase intentions.
3. **Marketing Strategies:** Effective communication of health benefits and nutritional advantages positively influenced perceptions, while misleading claims eroded trust.
4. **Socio-demographic Factors:** Income, education, and health-consciousness significantly impacted consumer attitudes and behaviors.

Table 5: Summary of Key Factors Influencing Consumer Perceptions

Factor	Description
Product Attributes	Nutritional value, ingredient quality, and organic/natural claims, Taste, texture, and visual appeal
Brand Image	Trustworthiness, reputation, and perceived quality of the brand
Marketing Strategies	Effective communication of health benefits and nutritional advantages, Potential for exaggerated or misleading claims
Socio-demographic Factors	Income, education, and health-consciousness, Higher-income and more educated consumers tend to be more health-conscious

4.3 Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study align with and expand upon the existing literature on consumer perceptions of health food brands. The observed disparity between perceived health value and actual nutritional quality echoes the findings of Franco-Arellano et al. (2020), while the importance of brand image in shaping consumer purchase intentions is consistent with the work of Purwanto et al. (2021). The study's examination of the influence of socio-demographic factors on consumer perceptions aligns with the research of Van et al. (2022).

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4.5 Factors Affecting Consumer Perceptions

The key factors influencing consumer perceptions of health food brands were:

1. **Product Attributes:** Consumers prioritize nutritional value, ingredient quality, and organic/natural claims as the most important product attributes. Taste, texture, and visual appeal also play a significant role.

- 2. Brand Image:** A strong, trustworthy brand image that signals quality and reliability is a crucial determinant of consumer confidence and purchase intentions.
- 3. Marketing Strategies:** Effective communication of health benefits and nutritional advantages positively influence perceptions, while misleading claims can erode consumer trust.
- 4. Sociocultural Influences:** Social norms, peer influence, and health-conscious communities shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards health food brands.

The quantitative data analysis, particularly the correlation and regression analyses, further corroborates the relative importance of these factors. Health-consciousness, brand preference, and socio-economic status were found to be significant predictors of perceived healthfulness of health food products.

4.6 Addressing the Research Questions

Research Question 1: *What are the key factors (e.g., product attributes, brand image, marketing strategies, sociocultural influences) that drive consumers' decision to purchase health food products, and how do they prioritize the importance of these factors?*

The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative phases reveal that the key factors driving consumer purchase decisions for health food products are product attributes, brand image, marketing strategies, and sociocultural influences. Consumers prioritize nutritional value, ingredient quality, and organic/natural claims as the most important product attributes, while a strong, trustworthy brand image and effective communication of health benefits are crucial determinants of consumer confidence and purchase intentions. Sociocultural influences, such as social norms and peer influence, also shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards health food brands.

Research Question 2: *How do consumers evaluate the perceived health benefits, nutritional value, and overall quality of health food brands? What are their opinions on the varying types of health food products available in the market?*

The mixed-methods approach revealed a significant disparity between consumers' perceived health value and the actual nutritional quality of some health food products. While consumers generally hold positive perceptions of health food brands and recognize their potential health benefits, they often overestimate the nutritional value of these products based on marketing claims and brand image.

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into consumer opinions on the diversity and quality of health food offerings. Participants expressed a desire for more transparency and accurate labeling to bridge the gap between perceived and actual product value. They also highlighted the need for a greater variety of affordable, high-quality health food options to cater to diverse consumer segments.

Research Question 3: *To what extent does consumers' socio-economic status (e.g., income, education, occupation) influence their perceptions and attitudes towards health food brands? Are there any significant differences in the way consumers from different socio-economic backgrounds perceive and approach health food products?*

The quantitative analysis, including the correlation and ANOVA tests, revealed that consumers' socio-economic status, particularly their income and education level, significantly influence their perceptions and attitudes towards health food brands. Participants from higher-income households and those with higher levels of education were more likely to perceive health food products as healthier and more beneficial compared to their lower socio-economic counterparts. These findings suggest that socio-economic status plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviors and preferences within the health food market.

The qualitative interviews corroborated these insights, with participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds expressing varying levels of health-consciousness, trust in health food brands, and access to these products. This highlights the importance for health food brands to consider the influence of socio-demographic factors when developing targeted marketing strategies and product offerings.

4.7 Implications and Recommendations

To address the findings, the study provides the following recommendations for health food brands:

1. Align marketing strategies with nutritional realities to bridge the gap between perceived and actual product quality (Lefebvre et al., 2019).
2. Emphasize nutritional transparency and build consumer trust through clear, accurate labeling and communication (Ogundijo et al., 2022).
3. Cultivate a strong, trustworthy brand image to positively influence consumer perceptions and purchase intentions.
4. Cater to diverse consumer segments by understanding the impact of socio-demographic factors on preferences and behaviors (Okpiaifo et al., 2023).
5. Promote health-consciousness and education to empower consumers to make informed choices (Mazis & Raymond, 1997).
6. Emphasize ethical and sustainable practices to align with growing consumer concerns.

By implementing these recommendations, health food brands can better align their products, marketing, and overall business strategies with evolving consumer perceptions and preferences, ultimately enhancing their market position and contributing to improved public health outcomes.

4.8 Conclusion

This mixed-methods study provides a comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions of health food brands (Lefebvre et al., 2019). The key findings suggest that while consumers generally hold positive perceptions of health food brands, there is a significant disparity between perceived health value and actual nutritional quality. Factors such as product attributes, brand image, marketing strategies, and socio-economic status play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Kahle et al., 2022).

The recommendations offer actionable insights for health food brands to better cater to the evolving needs and preferences of health-conscious consumers. By aligning their strategies with the identified factors, brands can build trust, enhance their market position, and contribute to improved public health outcomes (Okpiaifo et al., 2023; Pathak & Kumar, 2024).

Future research could explore the generalizability of these findings to other geographic regions and consumer segments, as well as investigate the long-term impact of health food consumption on individual and population-level health outcomes. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the dynamic nature of consumer perceptions and the evolving health food landscape could provide valuable insights for both practitioners and policymakers.

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