

Antecedents of Functional Food Purchase Intention of Sri Lankan Consumers: The Mediating Effect of Consumer Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

“Functional Food” is food and food components which provide benefits beyond basic nutrition, and it includes a wide variety of food and food components believed to improve overall health and well-being of people which help to reduce the risk of specific diseases. This paper examines antecedents (Customer knowledge, Necessity, Safety, Confidence, Rewards) of functional food purchase intention of Sri Lankan consumers and the mediating effect of consumer attitudes. Since the underlying attitudes of humans cater to their behaviour, it is important for marketers to understand the attitudes in relation to functional food so that they could be properly used in implementing marketing strategies. Objectives included examining the impact of customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence of functional and rewards from functional food on the purchase intention and the mediating impact of consumer attitude towards functional food on the relationship between the antecedents and purchase intention. The sample consists of 280 respondents from Colombo district within the age group of eighteen to sixty. Data were analyzed using correlation and regression to test hypothesis and it revealed that customer knowledge, necessity and safety has a negative impact while confidence and rewards has a positive impact on the purchase intention of functional food. A full mediation by consumer attitudes on the impact from customer knowledge and partial mediation on the impact from necessity, safety, confidence and rewards on the purchase intention could be observed. These findings will provide food companies and policy planners with valuable insights on consumer behaviour.

KEYWORDS: Functional food, Attitudes, Mediating effect

INTRODUCTION

Food is any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth. With the evolvement of time now people are very busy in their lifestyles and might not pay attention on their food as it was done in the early times. Therefore, what we can observe is that there are so many different kinds of health issues arising day by day. As a result, we have to think of a way of being healthy by consuming healthy food. But now we have come to point where we cannot be healthy by just having healthy food as we have been poisoning ourselves throughout the years passed with junk foods. As a result, we need to take measures to cure the poisoned parts of our body first and that is where functional food comes into place.

One of the recommendations of the research, “An assessment of consumers’ knowledge, attitudes and habits in relation to functional foods” is that; functional foods should be promoted among the people (Zoysa, et al., 2014). Another research done on “Assessing the Factors Affecting the Extent to which Consumers Incorporate Functional Ingredients in to their Diets: A Case of Sri Lankan Urban Consumers” states in their conclusion that promoters of functional foods must direct their promotions towards changing the attitudes of consumers about the effectiveness of the functional ingredient (Attanapola, Udugama, & Mudalige, 2011).

Most of the past researches done on the functional food, based on the attitudes towards the purchase intention are under the study of either Theory of Reasoned Action or Theory of Planned Behavior. Also the antecedents of consumer attitude of functional food have only being assessed with the “Willingness to use Functional Food”. But this research would cater in identifying the impact of antecedents of functional food purchase intention of Sri Lankan consumers and the mediating effect of consumer attitudes.

Globally there are many researches that have been carried out on the antecedents of attitudes on functional foods, while in Sri Lanka only two prominent researches that have been done.

In the current context we can understand is that there is a need for the functional food to be promoted among the people. Promotion is obviously an automatic concern of responsibility of the marketers of the functional food producers.

A major factor that has not been taken into consideration so far in relation to the attitudes related to functional food on the purchase intention which is the “Customer Knowledge” will be considered as factor to be measured under this study along with the functional food-related attitude

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measurements in explaining the willingness to use functional food through the study "Functional Foods in Finland" by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2005) which are Necessity, Safety, Confidence and Rewards.

Therefore, this study focuses on examining antecedents of functional food purchase intention of Sri Lankan consumers and the mediating effect of consumer attitudes under which the following research objectives were established;

1. To examine the impact of customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence of functional and rewards from functional food on the purchase intention.
2. To examine the mediating impact of consumer attitude towards functional food on the relationship between the antecedents and purchase intention.

The rest of the paper is developed under several sections including the literature related to functional food, functional food consumption behaviour along with attitudes and purchase intention. The third section comprises with the method and measures undertaken for the study while the rest of the sections include the analysis of the results, a brief discussion on the implications, conclusions and the limitations of the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature of food and human behaviour

Food is something that is considered as a basic need of the human beings. With that people have started following different patterns of consuming food depending on the lifestyle they spend. Their lifestyle depends upon the attitudes they have and those will play a major role in them deciding what they would be consuming as food for their survival.

Food and Functional food

Food is any nutritious substance that people or animals eat or drink or that plants absorb in order to maintain life and growth.

"Functional food is a rather new concept, and was developed in 1984 which was created by Japanese scientists, who studied the relationships between food products fortified with particular ingredients and the physiological effects they had on the body. The Japanese revolution in functional food increased the awareness for functional food in both the US and Europe" according to (Lopez, González, & Marcos, 2002; Menrad, 2003; Moller & Rowland, 2002). Doyon & Labrecque (2008) depicted that "a functional food is, or appears similar to, a conventional food. It is part of a standard diet and is consumed on a regular basis, in normal quantities. It has proven health benefits that reduce the risk of specific chronic diseases or beneficially affect target functions beyond its basic nutritional functions."

Functional Food in Sri Lanka

According to Ranaweera (2017), Medicines, Super Food and Fortified Food cannot be considered as Functional Food. In the context of Sri Lanka we can see Gotukola and Karawila (Bitter gourds) contain bioactive chemicals that brings us medicinal benefits according to (Ranaweera, 2017).

Ranaweera (2017) also stated that some functional foods are generated around a particular functional ingredient, for example foods containing probiotics (Beneficial microorganisms that improve our gut health and produce compounds like vitamins in our intestine) and prebiotics (Foods for probiotics, but be cannot digest them. E.g. Dietary fibre).

In Sri Lanka we have yoghurts containing probiotic bacteria Other functional foods or drinks can be foods fortified with a nutrient that would not usually be present to any great extent (e.g. folic acid fortified bread or breakfast cereals) as per noted by (Ranaweera, 2017)

Turmeric (Kaha) is a well know spice used in Sri Lanka for cooking as well as for many other things including treatment of wounds. Curcumin, an antioxidant present in turmeric, helps in lowering inflammation and speeding up the healing process. Similarly, Moringa (Drumstick), Oats, Sweet potato and many fish containing Omega 3 fatty acids (e.g. Hurulla – mackerel) are functional foods referring to what (Ranaweera, 2017) said.

According to Ranaweera (2017) major examples of functional food available in Sri Lanka at present are Probiotic, Prebiotics and Stanols. Probiotics are defined as live microorganisms – mostly bacteria – which when taken in adequate amounts confer a health benefit. Prebiotics promote the growth of particular bacteria in the large intestine that are beneficial to intestinal health and also inhibit the growth of bacteria that are potentially harmful to intestinal health. **Stanols** and sterols, which occur naturally in small amounts in plants and fruits, are thought to have a cholesterol lowering effect and are added to products such as reduced/low fat spreads.

Food consumption behaviour, attitudes and purchase intention

"Consumer behavior is the process consumers go through in different stages of the consumer purchasing a product or service" as per stated by (Blythe, 2008). "Understanding consumer behaviour is important to marketers in order to develop successful marketing strategies regarding the pricing, product placement, design, positioning and promotion of the product" as what (Askegaard, et al., 2006) stated in their studies.

"Examining attitudes is a good way to get a better understanding of consumer's behaviour in regards to a product, idea or service" as per (Ajzen, and Fishbein, 2005). "Attitudes have been found to affect food choice behaviour and they provide a useful tool for explaining food choices" according to (Tuorila, 1997).

"Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor". (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) According to Askegaard et al. (2006) attitudes can be divided into four functions as utilitarian, value-expressed, ego-defensive and a knowledge function, knowing which of these functions that affects consumers' behaviour can be beneficial as this allows the marketer to enhance benefits connected to a specific type of attitude, while shaping the marketing communication strategy for a product.

As most of the researches have used the existing theories such as Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned behaviour in studying their analysis, this study focuses on a model developed with the factors affecting the purchase intention of functional food.

"Purchase intention is a kind of decision-making that studies the reason to buy a particular brand by consumer" as per stated by (Shah, et al., 2012). Therefore, this is about what a person may think behind purchasing a particular product or service.

Reason why attitudes and purchase intention is studied in most of the researches that have been done so far is that, it is harder to measure the actual buying behaviour. People may act in different ways depending on the situations they face from time to time. Due to that difficulty we can observe that many of the theories and models that have been developed are based on the relationship between attitudes and the purchase intention such as Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behaviour.

Factors affecting the attitudes towards the purchase intention of functional food

A consumer's attitude towards functional foods can have a large effect on their decision to purchase, or not purchase, certain goods. According to Lähteenmäki and Urala (2007), when consumers make a food choice, it can be divided into three central factors: the food, the consumers, and environmental and economic issues.

A major factor, yet not been taken into consideration so far in relation to factors affecting purchase intention of functional food which is the "Customer Knowledge" will be considered as factor to be measured under this study along with four areas affecting consumer willingness to consume functional food; Necessity, Safety, Confidence and Rewards introduced through the study "Functional Foods in Finland" by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2005).

The knowledge component is especially essential for an area such as functional foods, in which the cost of engaging in health-related behaviours significantly exceeds the cost of conventional behaviour. Thus knowledge is crucial in this kind of product setting that is characterized by features that are more numerous and complex than those of food in general, and in which the benefits yielded by functional foods cannot be easily assessed. "Across all product categories, functional foods tend to be significantly more expensive than the corresponding conventional products" as per stated by (Sääksjärvi, Holmlund, & Tanskanen, 2009).

With reference to the previous literature H1 was developed. H1(a): Customer knowledge has a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food

"Necessity is a more general factor describing the necessity of functional food concept from society's point of view" according to the discussions by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2005). "Necessity from functional foods is about how consumers perceive the need for functional foods as a medicine" as per (Chen, 2011). "Necessity for functional food is mainly concerned about if consumers feel that functional food is necessary for society". (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2007)

Based on the above literature H2 was developed, H2(a): Necessity of functional food has a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food

"Safety of functional foods is concerned with how consumers perceive the possible risks associated with consumption of functional foods" as per stated by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2007).

Yet in consideration to the previous literature in relation to the safety in terms of Functional Food what we can observe is that if something negative happens, confidence and safety aspects are likely to rise as active parts of willingness to use functional foods as per stated by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2005).

But according to Chen (2011) "Consumers who believe that functional food is safe are more willing to consume functional foods". But it is better if we keep in mind that depending on the situations that might be working different in different countries and may change the results which were indicated in the research in Finland in terms of safety of functional food.

With reference to the above arguments H3 was developed. H3(a): Safety of functional food has a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food

"Confidence in functional food is about whether consumers think that functional foods can be used in order to promote their health, the level of confidence consumers have in functional foods and whether or not they perceive functional foods as something that is safe and healthy to consume" according to (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2007).

Following the above arguments H4 was developed. H4(a): Confidence in functional food has a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food

In relation to the Rewards from Functional Food it considered as the strongest predictor for the acceptance of functional foods according to (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2005).

At the same time Urala (2005) states that the rewarding feeling delivered from the use of functional food products gives the manufacturers attractive possibilities to communicate the health effects of the functional foods.

H5(a): Rewards from functional food has a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food

Adapting to the analysis conducting by (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008) in examining the mediating impact of attitudes on the relationship between health consciousness, food safety concern and ethical identity and purchase intention of organic food, the conceptual model was analyzed to determine whether attitudes mediate the relationship between customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence, rewards and intention.

According to (Baron & Kenny, 1986) and (Holmbeck, 1997), four conditions must hold in a test of mediating effects: (1) the predictor variables (customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence and rewards) significantly impact the mediator (attitude) in the expected direction; (2) the mediator (attitude) significantly impacts the dependent construct (intention) in the expected direction; (3) the predictor variables (customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence and rewards) significantly impact the dependent construct (intention) in the expected direction; and (4) after controlling for the effects of the mediator (attitude), the impact of the predictor variables (customer knowledge, necessity, safety, confidence and rewards) on the dependent construct (intention) is not significantly different from zero (for full mediation) or significantly reduced (for partial mediation). With respect to the conditions that must hold in a test of mediation effect the rest of the hypotheses were developed as follows;

H1(b): Customer knowledge has a significant impact on the consumer attitude towards functional food

H2(b): Necessity of functional food has a significant impact on the consumer attitude towards functional food

H3(b): Safety of functional food has a significant impact on the consumer attitude towards functional food

H4(b): Confidence in functional food has a significant impact on the consumer attitudes towards functional food

H6: Consumer attitudes towards functional food has a significant impact on the purchase intention

H5(b): Rewards from functional food has a significant impact on the consumer attitudes towards functional food

H7: Consumer attitudes mediate the relationship between the antecedents and purchase intention towards functional food

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework developed with reference to the previous literature taken into consideration for the study in relation to the particular requirements catering to the current study.

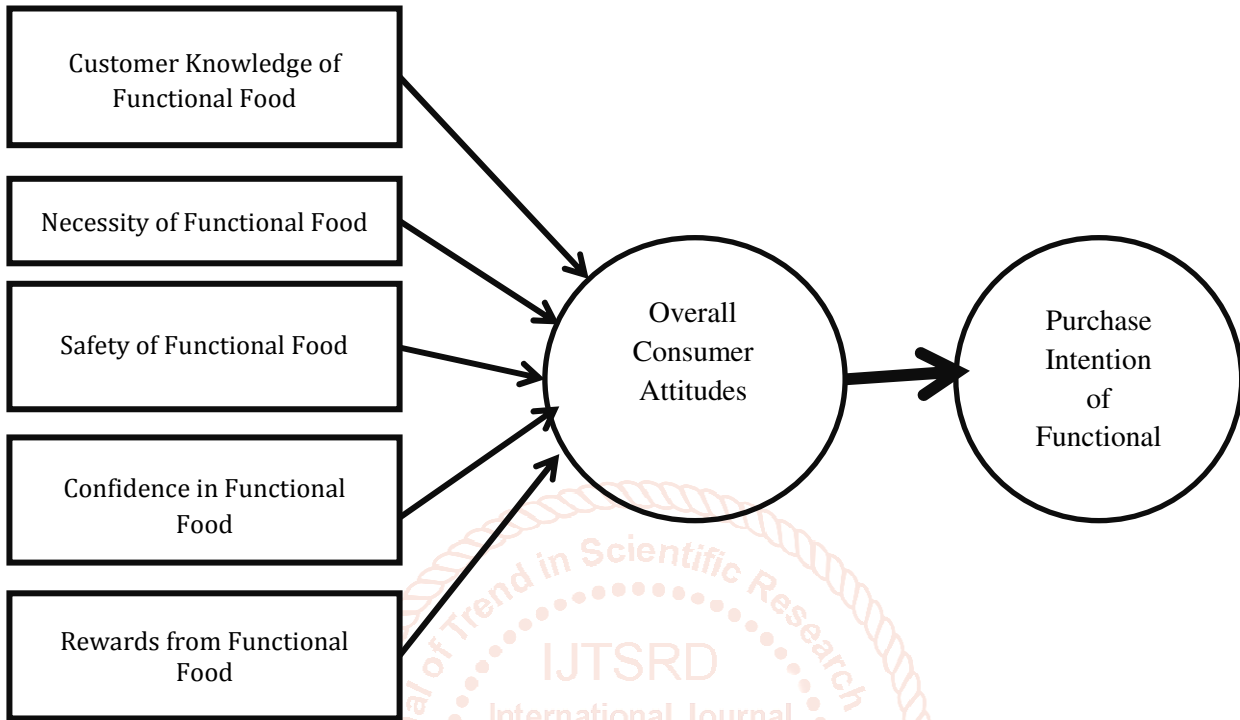


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

METHOD

Convenient sampling method was used to study the focused population between the ages of eighteen to sixty. Questionnaire based survey method was used for data collection. Two hundred and eighty participants were asked to respond for the questionnaire which was distributed both by hand and using online platforms using Google sheets.

Therefore, a total of 280 questionnaires were screened and incomplete questionnaires were rejected. Accordingly, 263 questionnaires were forwarded to data analysis. Data was analyzed using Correlation and Regression in SPSS 22.

MEASURES

The questionnaire was designed to initiate with a section catering to the Recognizability of functional food which provided an understanding on the extent to which the respondents were familiar about functional food. All the antecedents of consumer attitudes towards functional food were measured using 7 point Likert Scale with 1 as “Strongly Disagree” and 7 as “Strongly Agree” except customer knowledge which uses a 5 point Likert Scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with a not sure option. Overall consumer attitude towards functional food and purchase intention was also measured with a 7 point Likert Scale. Several other questions were used to cover general demographics of the respondent including his or her Gender, Age and the Level of Education

Reliability and validity of measures

The internal consistency was ensured as the Cronbach’s values for all the constructs were closer or above 0.7, the threshold as per presented in Table 1. Content, construct, convergent and discriminant validity were also tested to validate the measurement model used for the study (Hair et al., 1998). The content validity was validated through a proper literature review being conducted for the study. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) should be greater than 0.5 for construct validity and convergent to be established (Ha & Jang, 2012). Table1 presents the AVEs for the measured constructs being validated on construct validity and convergent with their values being greater than 0.5. According to Hair et al., (1998) the composite reliability should be greater than 0.7 to accept the dimension under the factor analysis which is presented in relevance to the study by the Table 1. Discriminant validity can be assessed by comparing the shared variances among constructs with the AVE (average variance extracted) on the individual constructs as explained in (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). The respective constructs have been validated on the discriminant validity too as per the Table 2.

Table 1 Results of Reliability and Validity of Measures

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Discriminant Validity				
				1	2	3	4	5
Customer Knowledge	0.65	0.76	0.53	0.53				
Necessity	0.81	0.89	0.58	.024	0.58			
Safety	0.73	0.84	0.57	.024	.24	0.57		
Confidence	0.69	0.85	0.59	.018	.058	.00	0.59	
Rewards	0.89	0.92	0.59	.023	.18	.0529	.25	0.59

Note: The information was derived through the analysis using SPSS software
AVE (Bolded values along the diagonal) > r² value of other dimensions

The measurements for the consumer attitude and purchase intention were also validated under the reliability analysis with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.874 and 0.860 respectively.

RESULTS

A total of 280 questionnaires were received, only 263 questionnaires were usable for this study and met the required inclusion criteria. 17 questionnaires deemed unusable, because the identified outliers were omitted for the further studies. The sample consisted of 129 Females and 134 Males. 114 respondents are in the age category of 18-30 representing 43.35% of the sample. 44 respondents are in the age category of 31-40 which is 16.73% of the sample. 64 respondents and 41 respondents are within the age categories of 41-50 and 51-60 representing 24.33% and 15.59% respectively. A substantial amount of the respondents are Graduates or have completed higher qualifications representing 42.59% of the sample. The next highest set of respondents have passed up to GCE (O/L) with a count of 69 respondents and representing 26.24% of the sample considered. 21.67% of the respondents have passed up to GCE (A/L) while the least representation is from the undergraduate with a percentage of only 9.51%.

According to Table 2 all the antecedents of functional food purchase intention has received significance values less than 0.05 (alpha value) for the regression tests conducted on both the relationships between the predictor variables and the mediator and predictor variables and the dependent variable revealing that the alternative hypothesis H1(a), H2(a), H3(a), H4(a), H5(a) and H1(b), H2(b), H3(b), H4(b), H5(b) can be accepted confirming that there exist a significant impact from all the antecedents considered, on the purchase intention and consumer attitudes respectively. Also alternative hypothesis H6 can be accepted confirming that there exists a significant impact from consumer attitudes on the purchase intention as per the significance value of 0.000 which is less than 0.05 in Table 2. Therefore, the four conditions that must hold in a mediator test as per mentioned under the literature review was successfully satisfied. Table 2

Summary- Regression Significance (Conditions for Mediator Analysis)

Predictor Variable & Mediator (Antecedent & Attitude)		Mediator & Dependent Variable (Attitude & Purchase Intention)	Predictor Variable & Dependent Variable (Antecedents & Purchase Intention)	
Customer Knowledge	0.02	0.000	Customer Knowledge	0.00
Confidence	0.00		Confidence	0.00
Necessity	0.00		Necessity	0.00
Rewards	0.00		Rewards	0.00
Safety	0.00		Safety	0.00

Note: The information was derived through the analysis using SPSS software According to Table 3, when comparing the significance values received on the regression test conducted on the impact from the antecedents of functional food on the purchase intention before and after adding the mediator (consumer attitude) to model it can be observed that the strength of the direct relationship has reduced for each of the individual antecedent. Yet it can be observed that after adding the mediator the Customer Knowledge does not have a significant impact on the purchase intention of functional food revealing that there exists a full mediation by consumer attitudes. The rest of the antecedents including necessity, safety, confidence and rewards indicate that even after adding the mediator (receiving a significance value less than 0.05) the significant impact on the purchase intention from them remains the same revealing there exist only partial mediation from the consumer attitudes.

Table 3

Summary - Regression values before and after adding mediator (Consumer Attitude) along with the Sobel test value determining the mediation type or existence

Variable	Regression Values before adding mediator		Regression Values after adding mediator		Sobel test P value	Mediation
	Coefficient	Sig	Coefficient	Sig	Sig	
Customer Know	-.57	.01	-.20	.11	.02	Full Mediation
Necessity	-.41	.00	-.11	.01	.00	Partial Mediation
Safety	-.27	.00	-.11	.00	.00	Partial Mediation
Confidence	.47	.00	.10	.03	.00	Partial Mediation
Rewards	.75	.00	.34	.00	.00	Partial Mediation

Note: The information was derived through the analysis using SPSS software

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A strong negative impact from customer knowledge on the purchase intention of functional food was observed according to the regression analysis before adding the mediator (consumer attitudes). In contrast to what is said by Sääksjärvi, Holmlund and Tanskanen (2009) as, the knowledge component is especially essential for an area such as functional foods, in which the cost of engaging in health-related behaviours significantly exceeds the cost of conventional behavior and the knowledge being crucial in this kind of product setting that is characterized by features that are more numerous and complex than those of food in general, and in which the benefits yielded by functional foods cannot be easily assessed, this research has derived that the significance of customer knowledge on the purchase intention is very low compared to the other antecedents. It might be due to the proper management of the other antecedents. It was observed under the analysis that there exists a full mediation from consumer attitudes on the impact from customer knowledge on the purchase intention of functional food. According to Zoysa, et al. (2014) even though the research has been carried out targeting Colombo, it has a recommendation to identify the importance of promoting the functional foods. Therefore, in the Sri Lankan context we can identify that there is a need to properly promote functional food to make customer knowledge a significant impact on the consumer attitudes to make an impact on the purchase intention of functional food as what was derived from the study was that there exists a negative relationship between customer knowledge and the purchase intention.

There is a weak negative impact from necessity on purchase intention according to the regression analysis. The necessity for Functional Food (FF NEC) affected positively the willingness to use functional food products according what was concluded by Lähteenmäki & Urala (2004). But this research study has derived there is a negative impact from necessity of functional food on purchase intention of functional food with reference to the Sri Lankan context which is still might be because people not clearly recognizing the necessity of functional food due to the lack of proper marketing strategies in promoting them.

A weak negative impact from safety on purchase intention could be observed according to the regression analysis. This comply with the results generated by Lähteenmäki and Urala (2007) where the "Safety of Functional Food (FF SAF) decreased respondents' willingness to use organic bread an example of Functional Food". Neither in 2001 or 2004 did the safety of Functional Food affect the respondents' willingness to use Functional Food products. The consumers seem to be aware of the possibility that use of Functional Food may have risks, but the possible risks do not affect the evaluated behaviour tendency.

A close strong positive impact from confidence on purchase intention was observed according to the regression analysis which complies with the results of the research in 2002, where Confidence in Functional Food (FF CON) had a statistically significant effect on the willingness to use the Functional Food. Also the mistrust and the risks may not affect the personal behaviour as per stated by (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2007).

Respondents who obtained rewards from using functional food were those most willing to use all the functional food examples and by choosing and using functional food consumers may achieve a modern and positive impression of themselves according to (Lähteenmäki & Urala, 2004). Complying with that a strong positive impact from rewards on purchase intention was observed according to the regression analysis.

As a partial mediation by consumer attitudes could be observed for the rest of the antecedents including necessity, safety, confidence and rewards, the negative impact from necessity and safety could be converted to a more favourable impact through improving the attitudes people have on functional food while improving the current impact from the confidence and rewards on the purchase intention.

In the psychological aspect of the consumer behaviour "The amount of regret and responsibility that the consumer would feel in each situation is likely to depend on whether the consumer selected the well-known or the cheaper alternative" (Simonson, 1992). Therefore, as the research findings state that there exists a full mediation by the consumer attitudes on the impact from customer knowledge on the purchase intention of functional food, it is better to improve the attitudes towards functional food in terms of consumer knowledge as "The choice of a better-known brand might be associated of regret and responsibility as well as the magnitude of responsibility" (Simonson, 1992). At the same time as there exist a strong positive impact from confidence on the purchase intention of functional food, by improving the consumer attitudes the consumers will be of more confidence resulting with less regret.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AREAS

As the population area was limited only to age eighteen to sixty for the easiness of study purposes, it was harder to take real picture about overall age categories. On the use of Online Google sheets the researcher was not able to actually be present at the respondents' requirements. Difficulties were faced by the researcher in finding previous research and articles, especially for measurement scales with attitudes related to functional food purchase intention in Sri Lankan context. As only the Colombo area was considered to conduct the survey this study will not be able to provide the overall Sri Lankan context exactly.

Therefore, it could be recommended to get a sample, island wide representing all the districts. It can be suggested to carry out this research under different cultural settings in order to look into potential differences in attitudes depending on different cultures as Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural country. This would provide the researchers to arrive at result with undermining sociological factors affecting the purchase intention with respect to their cultures.

Convenient Sampling method was used for the study. Therefore, it can be recommended to test the study using another sampling method to test the consistency of the conclusions derived.

At the same time if the psychological factors such as perception, motivation and learning could be included to the established framework, more insights could be gained on which areas the to be improved in terms of the purchase intention of functional food.

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