

Factors Influencing Malaysian Consumers Online Purchase of Herbal Products

Golnaz Rezai*, Muhammad Zaid M. Zahran, Zainalabidin Mohamed and Juwaidah Sharifuddin

Department of Agribusiness and Information Systems, Faculty of Agriculture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The industry for natural products has experienced a significant growth in demand for its products and there is no surprise that the government has given it full support. The economical production methods have made it possible for the Malaysian Small and Medium Businesses Enterprises (SMEs) to increase their output. However due to the limited number of available resources, local SMEs are finding themselves in competition for shelf space in retail grocery stores. One way to resolve this issue is for producers and entrepreneurs to turn to the internet to attract customers. A website that could offer the herbal products online could be an ideal venue to market such products. Moreover, the launch of such a website needs relatively minimal skills and infrastructure. In this study 1063 internet users were interviewed online in order to identify the factors which could influence their intention to purchase herbal products online. Descriptive Analysis and Factor Analysis were employed in this study. The factors which have been found to be significant in predicting the intentions of an average Malaysian to shop online for herbal product are: the internet speed and experience, herbal product characteristics, perceived benefits, subjective norm, payment methods and English proficiency.

Keywords: Herbal products, online shopping, intention, factor analysis, Malaysian consumers

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E-mail addresses:

rgolnaz@upm.edu.my (Golnaz Rezai),
zaid.zahran@gmail.com (Muhammad Zaid M. Zahran),
zam@upm.edu.my (Zainalabidin Mohamed),
juwaidah@upm.edu.my (Juwaidah Sharifuddin)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The public awareness toward technology in Malaysia can no longer be doubted (Ooi *et al.*, 2011). The use of the personal computers through government efforts, low cost in obtaining them or other factors have led to a greater use of the Internet in the country.

Along with this online shopping has seen a growing rate in Malaysia over the years . Everything from flight tickets to shawls to football jerseys to electronics are purchased online by Malaysian internet users. The increased spending year after year has made way for a wide variety of online products which suggests that the online shopping medium or e-commerce is a ripe tool for expanding businesses especially those with limited capital and resources like small medium enterprises (SMEs).

Similarly on the rise is the local manufacture of herbal products by local SMEs. According to NPCB , in 2011 about 69% of all natural products such as herbal products and traditional medicine are locally produced. In contrast, products from China which is the main exporter of natural products to Malaysia account for only 15% of the total registered products . This indicates an abundance of locally produced herbal products sold alongside imported products thus making them compete against each other for limited shelf space, marketing avenues and distribution channels. Most of these products are manufactured by SMEs with relatively small capitals and to compete in a fiercely competitive environment such as this does not seem to have a pleasant prospect for the business owners (Department of statistic, 2012).

Hence there is a need for cost effective and low barriers to entry medium in order to help the local herbal products manufacturers survive. This study proposes the use of the online shopping medium as a more cost effective medium for selling the locally

produced SME herbal products. Thus it would be an ideal marketing alternative to initiate an online herbal product shopping website with the relatively minimal skills and infrastructure it requires. To truly thrive on their online shopping venture, SMEs would need reliable data on their prospective online consumers. This vital data should include demographics, perceptions about herbal products, perceptions about online shopping itself, their attitude towards shopping online for herbal products, whether their friends and families would play a major role in their shopping decision, or whether they have the necessary skills and equipment to purchase online. Data such as these would be vital for an SME to evaluate their likelihood of success in the online shopping, helping them make a more informed decision about this relatively new marketing channel, and perhaps to later thrive on.

REVIEW PAST STUDIES

Factors Affecting Online Shopping

Internet shopping is a novelty to most consumers in Malaysia but there have been some academic efforts to examine what constitutes the intentions and desirability of Malaysian consumers to shop online. Haque and Khatibi (2005) identified several factors such as online product price, trust in the online shop and education. Harn *et al.* (2006) found that a Chinese Malaysian is more likely to shop online compared to other ethnicities. The study also states similar online spending trend among degree holders and those with credit cards and/or cheque books. According to their study

there are also some of the concerns of consumers associated with online shopping include the presence or lack of consumer protection laws, the level of trust in merchants, personal information safety, secured payments and to a lesser extent customs checks. However, directly related to future purchasing intentions was trust in the online retailer.

Hassan and Abdullah (2010) also tested four factors associated with online shopping on Malaysian internet users which are trust, website design, internet knowledge, and internet advertisement. Alam *et al.* (2008) examined the tendency to shop online among young Malaysians. They found that there were four factors associated with online shopping among young Malaysians via factor analysis such as trust, reliability, website design, and customer service. In a similar study, Delafrooz *et al.* (2010) studied factors which may affect students' attitude towards online shopping. As attitude is an important antecedent affecting behavioural intentions, any factors associated with it in this case would naturally be an influential factor towards the intention of shopping online. Among the factors are product price, the convenience of online shopping, a wider selection of products and a utilitarian approach to shopping as opposed to hedonistic shopping. The demographic factors affecting attitude were found to be age and income, based on the same analysis.

Ghazali *et al.* (2006) found that users are not very keen to purchase fish online, citing that they identify more with factors which impede the purchase of fish online

as compared to its advantages. Shafie *et al.* (2011) went in a different direction and surveyed the blogs of female shop owners and found that attributes such as trust, privacy of personal information and reliable vendors are very important to such group of shoppers. Aside from these they also place importance on the range of products, search ability within the website as well as customer service and social networking integration. Shaffril *et al.* (2009) may have shed some light onto why agricultural products and services are still an online rarity in Malaysia based on their survey of 450 agopreneurs; agricultural entrepreneurs do not surf the internet much for agriculture related websites. Their most visited agricultural website is the Department of Agriculture Malaysia website (www.agrolink.moa.my/doa), followed by the Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute (MARDI) (www.mardi.my) and Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority (FAMA) websites (www.agrolink.moa.my/fama). Efforts by the government bodies such as the Department of Agriculture's "Agribazaar" are more towards creating business leads or B2B transactions and information hubs than traditional B2C online shopping. Ghani and Ahmad (2011) asserted that the Agribazaar was successful in generating business leads though much improvement is still required. In their study portal usefulness, system administrator support, portal's usability, content accuracy, relevant features, and privacy and legitimacy among some of the topics that needed improvement.

Product characteristics and features

are play important role in purchasing decision and (Degeratu, 1999). The study by Vijayasathy (2002) shows that the importance of same characteristics in the online shopping medium. Products which are standardized in quality or believed to be of uniform quality such as books, DVDs, groceries and flowers are more likely to be considered when shopping online. This also holds true for products which consumers prefer to buy in anonymity or in privacy (Grewal *et al.*, 2002). In comparison to this there are certain categories of products which result in a lower intention for consumer online shopping. These are more personal products for which consumers may have different preferences such as hygiene products, perfume and cosmetics as well as those products which require experience and knowledge of the product such as cars and electronics (Elliot & Fowell, 2000). As herbal products have a wide range of product characteristics, only those that can be related to the online shopping medium were included in the study. These include

the quality of ingredients used in their production as opposed to taste, or the packaging as opposed to the tactile feel of the products and the health benefit claims of the products compared to ability to sample the products.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

After deliberation and referring to the literature the researchers have based their conceptual framework on the Theory of Planned Behavior model developed by Ajzen in 1991. The conceptual framework can be observed in Fig.1. Factors included in the model were gathered from the literature, paying special attention to similar studies in other developing countries such as Thailand, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia among others. The factors examined in developing countries include Internet Speed, English Proficiency, and Internet Experience. Well known factors such as Trust, Perceived Consequences and others examined in the literature review

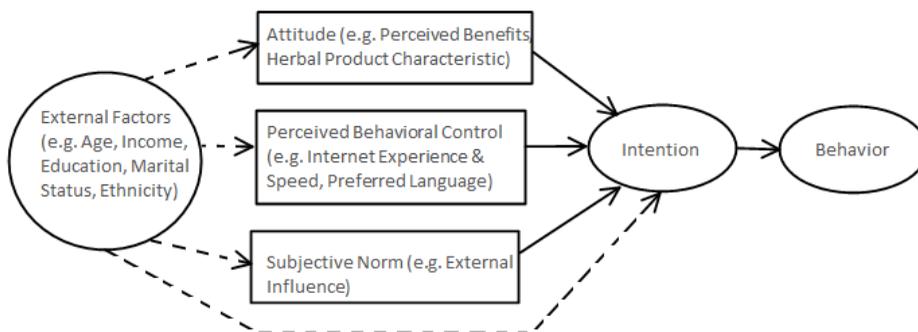


Fig.1: TPB based conceptual research model

were included to examine their influence on the behavior of Malaysian consumers for online shopping. Herbal knowledge, experience with herbal products and their perception towards them is also examined, as the knowledge of the function of a specific herb may affect the consumer's decision to purchase a product containing that particular herb. Demographic factors are also included in the model as well as the effects all three of the constituents in the original TPB model and the Intention to perform the behavior itself.

Data Gathering

Online questionnaires were designed and distributed to users of the online social networking site have listed their current city of residence in Peninsular Malaysia on their social networking profile. Out of the three thousand email invitations to participate in the e-survey, 1063 respondents completed the questionnaire satisfactorily, indicating a success rate of 35%. The questionnaire is divided into 3 sections: personal information of respondents, herbal products consumption pattern preferences and online shopping intention of herbal based products.

Model Specification

Data analysis is then completed using descriptive analysis in order to quantify the demographics of the study. An explanatory factor analysis (EFA) was carried out to identify the component matrix. By performing EFA, we can determine the number of construct and any underlying structure among the variables included in

the study.

Factor analysis was used to uncover the latent factors underlying consumers' perception and intention to purchase herbal products online. Respondents answered 55 statements which were seven point Likert scale and five point Likert scale about their attitudes, perception, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control and intention towards the online purchase of herbal products.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Demographic Profile

Descriptive analysis was used to describe the sample and the results of the socio demographic profile of the respondents of this study. The demographic profile includes gender, ethnicity, marital status, age, education and income. Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1 indicates majority of the respondents were female (60.9 percent) compared to males (39.1 percent). Most of the respondents were Malays (57.9 percent), followed by Chinese (30.3 percent), Indians (10.1 percent), and other races with 9 respondents (1.7%). Since each ethnic group has its own herbal knowledge and legacy, this could mean that some ethnic groups are more inclined than others to use herbal products and possibly what herbs they prefer or know about. Most of the respondents range from 18 to 54 years old (85.7 percent), which is considered the active working or earning age. From the one thousand sixty three (1063) respondents, 63.9 percent were

married while 35.3 percent were single and 0.8 percent were single parents.

While marital status may not have a proven effect on herbal and supplement consumption, the added financial pressure of marriage may persuade some respondents to use herbal supplements and treatment instead of costly conventional healthcare. Furthermore, some herbs are specifically used as aphrodisiacs. The respondents with at least SPM (high school equivalent) represent 14.4 percent of total respondents. Certificate and diploma holders account for 28.2 percent of respondents, and can be considered as college goers. Finally, about 57 percent of the total respondents hold university degree.

Factor analysis

In this study, Keiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy test and Bartlett's test of Sphericity were used to measure the sampling adequacy and the presence of the correlation between all the variables. The KMO test is used to test whether there is a significant number of a factor in the data set and measure the proportion of total variation in dependant variables that can be explained by independent variables. In this study, the result of KMO test reached the value of at least 0.800 (meritorious) which indicates that the sampling adequacy and factor analysis can be carried out.

After the varimax rotation of the consumers' responses to the 55 statements

TABLE 1
Summary of Respondents Background

Characteristic	Percentage	Characteristic	Percentage
Gender		Marital Status	
Male	39.1	Single	35.3
Female	60.9	Married	63.9
		Single Parent	0.8
Ethnicity		Education level	
Malay	57.9	Primary/Secondary	14.4
Chinese	30.3	Diploma	28.2
Indian	10.1	Degree	46.1
Other	1.7	Postgrad Degree	11.3
Age		Income	
under18	6.3	Below 1500	15.1
18-24	25.4	1501-3000	33.5
25-34	34.2	3001-4500	35.3
35-54	26.1	4501-6000	8.5
55+	8	Above 6001	7.6

Source: Survey, 2011

relating to their perception towards the purchase of herbal products online, the factor loading from the exploratory factor analysis was obtained and presented in Table 3. The factor analysis of 24 attitudinal statements was conducted and factors are then ranked according to the proportion of variance explained and a name was then given to each factor to reflect the latent stimuli underlying consumers' behavior towards herbal products and its online purchase. In this study, six latent factors which influence the consumers' behavior towards the online shopping herbal products were identified. The six latent factors which account for about 65.454 percent of the total variance are summarized as follow.

The first factor can be categorized as the risk of online shopping, with a total of 7 sub-variables and a combined variance explanation of 65.454%. As indicated in Table 3, the factor consists of the statements: The risk of being cheated is higher in online shopping of herbal products compared to shops or supermarkets (0.806), My credit card information may be exposed to risk when I shop online (0.688), Sometimes the picture you see in the website is not what you exactly get (0.686), It's not easy to trust the online sellers since I don't meet them in person (0.650), I am not sure about

the quality of the product that I ordered online (0.647), Online shopping is riskier compared to traditional shopping (0.604), and receiving a purchased product in good condition is very important to me (0.558). From this factor, we can clearly assume that the consumer is still apprehensive about the risks associated with online shopping .

The second factor, with a total accountable variance of 14.651%, is labelled "Social Encouragement to Buy Online. It consists of 5 statements, which are: My friends encourage me to purchase some products online (0.702), My boss recommends me to try online shopping (0.671), My colleagues think buying products online is convenient (0.635), My online friends think purchasing online is convenient (0.615) and My family would approve of online purchasing (0.603). From this factor, we can surmise that consumers feel the need to conform to the social norm around them, and can be affected by it to shop online for herbal products. It can also be said to reflect the collectivistic nature of Malaysian society.

Internet speed is the third factor uncovered in the factor analysis. This factor accounts for around 6.2% of the total variance. The statements in this factor include: A stable internet connection would

TABLE 2
KMO and Bartlett Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.831
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx Chi-square	11575.232.897
	d.f	276
	Significance	0.000

TABLE 3
Summary of Factor Analysis Results

Items	Factor Loading					
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
Internet Speed and Experience (ISE)						
A stable internet connection would make purchasing herbal products online more comfortable to me.	0.769					
I am confident that I can purchase products online if I wanted to.	0.755					
My understanding of the internet after years of using it helps me to shop online better, such as herbal products.	0.745					
If I were to shop online for herbal products, I would be comfortable and have complete control of my shopping process (e.g. I would know what to do and can do it with confidence).	0.680					
The speed of my internet connection is important when trying to purchase herbal products online.	0.668					
I would be more confident to purchase herbal products online if my internet connection is stable and fast.	0.641					
Variance (% of variance explained)	15.322					
Herbal Products Characteristics (HPC)						
There may be many fake/counterfeit herbal products on the internet trying to scam me.		0.827				
I am not sure about the authenticity/genuineness of the product that I ordered online.		0.768				
Sometimes the quality of the ingredient is not what I expected.		0.752				
It can be a bad experience if I did not receive the claimed benefits of the herbal product I purchased online.		0.689				
Receiving a purchased herbal product in good and safe packaging is very important to me.		0.652				
It is disappointing if the purchased herbal product is from an old stock/not fresh/new.		0.566				
Variance (% of variance explained)		13.887				
Perceived Benefits (PB)						
Online shopping for herbal products would be a good alternative to traditional shopping (e.g. shops and supermarkets etc.).			0.858			
There are more benefits in online shopping for herbal products compared to traditional shopping.			0.822			

TABLE 3 (continue)

Purchasing herbal products online would be very convenient (e.g. saves fuel, shop from home etc.).	0.682
Online purchasing of herbal products would be enjoyable.	0.644
Variance (% of variance explained)	12.381
External Influence (EI)	
People who are important to me influence me to buy herbal products online.	0.815
People important to me think I should try purchasing herbal products online.	0.760
If someone I know has purchased herbal products online, then I would like to try it too.	0.725
Variance (% of variance explained)	8.402
Payment Method (PM)	
Online paying services like PayPal requires me to have a credit card.	0.866
A lot of online vendors prefer credit cards.	0.864
Variance (% of variance explained)	7.733
Preferred Language (PL)	
I prefer vendors who use English instead of Bahasa Malaysia.	0.745
My command of the English language makes me confident in buying herbal products online.	0.716
I am more confident in buying from an online vendor who can use English.	0.658
Variance (% of variance explained)	7.729
Total percentage of variance	65.454

make purchasing online more comfortable to me (0.736), The speed of my internet connection is important when trying to purchase online (0.713) and I would be more confident to purchase online if my internet connection is stable and fast (0.657). From this collection of sub-variables, we can assume that for online shopping of herbal products, the internet connection speed can play an important role for consumers.

This next factor consists of statements which can be categorized as Reliable Vendor

and Trust. With an explained variable percentage of 2.9%, the statements in this factor include: A vendor using a trusted delivery service (e.g DHL, UPS, FedEx etc.) would be my choice (0.706), I would purchase from an online vendor which has an honest and good reputation (0.623), A well-known vendor would be my choice when buying a herbal product online (0.583), Purchasing online would be very convenient (0.549) and I would purchase a herbal product from an online vendor who

is reliable (0.508). From these sub-variables, it can be assumed that a reliable vendor and trust is important when purchasing online, especially for herbal products.

The fifth factor is called Credit Card, and represents 1.582% of the total observed variance in the study. The statements in this factor are: A lot of online vendors prefer credit cards (0.911) and online paying services like PayPal requires me to have a credit card (0.611). This factor, needless to say, highlights the significant role played by credit cards in the online shopping environment.

And finally, accounting for 1.262% of the total variance observed in the study, internet experience consists of 3 statements: With my experience using the internet, buying herbal products online would be easy (0.815), I use the internet frequently so learning to shop online for herbal products would not be too difficult to me (0.543) and My understanding of the internet after years of using it helps me to shop online better (0.254). Obviously, the internet users in Malaysia think of themselves as experienced users, and can possibly handle new experiences well, thereby making internet experience a significant factor when shopping online for herbal products .

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research was to uncover the factors influencing the internet users to purchase herbal product online in Malaysia. The factors which are significant in predicting the intentions of an average Malaysian to shop online for a herbal

product are: Internet Speed and Experience (ISE), Herbal Products Characteristics (HPC), Perceived Benefits (PB), External Influence (EI), Payment Method (PM) and Preferred Language (PL). These six factors explained about 65.45 percent of the variance found in the data.

The attitude of respondents towards the purchasing of herbal products online is generally positive in terms of advantages of online shopping, such as fun factor, efficiency, and more variety. The risks associated with online shopping as well as trust related issues also strongly influence the respondents' attitude. This finding concurs with other online shopping studies as such issues define the concerns with online shopping medium itself. The specific herbal product characteristics such as quality of ingredients, safety and freshness of packaging and others also affect the attitude of respondents. Addressing some of the respondent concerns while highlighting the advantages of online shopping can help to improve the attitude of potential customers towards online shopping of herbal products.

The society's views played an important role in this study as well as respondents reporting that family, friends, even the government influenced them with regards to online shopping for herbal products. This seems to be supported by the high influence of family and friends as sources of information on herbal products as well as their persuasiveness in convincing respondents to purchase herbal products. Malaysia seems to still be a collectivistic based society where the values of family and society are

more important than the individual. As such, marketing and promotions such as referrals, group discounts, and other tactics which require the participation of potential customers would likely be effective as well in the context of herbal products and the online shopping of herbal products. It would also be worthwhile to note that as family and friends are considered the most likely to influence respondents to purchase herbal products online, and considering the trend today, marketing on social networking sites where respondents interact with friends and family would also be potentially effective.

While most respondents express the confidence and familiarity with the internet, they are also concerned about the speed and stability of their internet connection, so much so that items pertaining to internet speed and stability were included in one of the highest rated factors uncovered in the exploratory factor analysis: Internet Speed and Experience. Along with the computer hardware and familiarity with the internet, the ISE factor suggests that those with broad band connections, currently considered the fastest and most stable available internet option in Malaysia, would be more likely to shop online for herbal products. Therefore marketing to those who have broad band would likely yield more results compared to those who go without it.

The findings of this study may prove useful as a rough guide to some of the factors needed to be addressed when considering the online marketing of herbal products. As the government is pushing for

the advancement of the agro-entrepreneurs of the industry, the internet marketing of products is essential in opening up new avenues of marketing for the entrepreneurs. Hopefully the government will not only focus on the production and expert support side of the advancement plan, but also consider providing marketing support and advice in order to fully realize the potential of local agro-entrepreneurs. Practical information such as which demographics to target, which avenue of marketing to pursue are examined to one degree or another within this study and should prove useful for such plans. The chi-squared result obtained in this study should prove useful in this regard.

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