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The influence of brand experience on purchasing decisions in the functional food industry: Empirical evidence in Hai Phong City

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how brand experience influences purchase decisions in the functional food industry in Hai Phong, Vietnam. Using data from 620 valid consumer responses, the research assesses the impact of sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral experiences on purchasing choices. Regression results indicate that all four dimensions significantly and positively influence purchase decisions, with intellectual and behavioral experiences being the strongest predictors. These findings enhance the theoretical understanding of brand experience by affirming its importance in a high-involvement, health-related product category. The study offers practical insights for enterprises, highlighting the importance of providing clear information, boosting consumer interaction, and creating emotionally engaging brand touchpoints. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also addressed

Keywords: Brand experience, purchase decision, thực phẩm chức năng, Hai Phong City..

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the demand for functional foods to improve health, supplement nutrition, or prevent diseases has increased significantly in many countries, including Vietnam. The functional foods market is therefore becoming more competitive, forcing enterprises to focus not only on product quality but also on building a strong brand image to attract and keep customers. In this context, "brand experience" emerges as a key concept; it reflects the collection of feelings, emotions, and perceptions that consumers encounter when interacting with brands, from advertising and packaging to distribution channels and after-sales service.

The idea of consumer behavior suggests that before making a purchase decision, consumers typically go through stages of identifying brands, evaluating options, and making a choice, where factors like brand, perception, and past experience are important (Jacoby et al., 1998). Research in the area of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) has shown that brand image, which relates to brand experience, positively influences "purchase intent" (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2014; Sulehria et al., 2022). However, in the functional foodindustry, a market with a high perception of health risks, focusing only on brand image or product awareness without considering brand experience can overlook the key factors that truly influence the purchase decision.

There is considerable research exploring the relationship between brand experience and purchasing decisions, especially for health products or functional foods. Some studies in the food industry have documented that "brand experience" influences consumers' willingness to buy (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2014). Additionally, in research on functional foods in Vietnam, many works still focus on factors such as trust, word-of-mouth (eWOM), price, and product knowledge without fully considering brand experience as an independent factor, indicating that a theoretical gap still exists (Hoang & Pham, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Additionally, the functional food market in Vietnam, especially in major coastal cities like Hai Phong, is seeing the rise of many domestic and imported brands, along with a variety of distribution channels such as pharmacies, food stores, and online/social media, all amid intense competition. In this environment, brand experience can serve as a significant competitive advantage by helping enterprises differentiate their products, build customer trust, and influence purchasing decisions. However, because health-related products are sensitive, consumers tend to be more cautious; they are not only interested in the effects and prices but also pay attention to factors like reliability, origin, brand reputation, and their feelings after interacting with the brand. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine whether brand experience truly has a strong impact on consumers' decisions to buy functional foods. The findings are expected to fill a gap in the theoretical understanding of how the concept of brand experience applies to the functional foods industry and to offer practical recommendations for enterprises and managers regarding branding, communication, packaging design, and customer care strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand experience and its role in purchase decision

Over the past twenty years, marketing has shifted from emphasizing product features to prioritizing experiential consumption. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of functional value but active participants in creating meaning through brand interactions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Unlike satisfaction or brand attitude, which are evaluations after consumption, brand experience is formed at every touchpoint and includes sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social

responses (Brakus et al., 2009). Schmitt's (1999) Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) describe this construct as five interconnected dimensions, each representing different forms of consumer engagement.

Empirical studies have supported this multidimensional view. Brakus et al. (2009) demonstrated that brand experiences influence satisfaction, loyalty, and perceptions of personality. Iglesias et al. (2011) emphasized the significant role of affective and behavioral experiences in fostering trust and loyalty, while Carrizo-Moreira et al. (2017) and Satti et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of sensory and emotional factors in food and beverage consumption. Research also indicates that experiential marketing appeals strongly to younger consumers, especially Gen Z, who prioritize authenticity and interactive experiences (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). This trend is especially evident in Vietnam, where more than 60% of the population is under 35 and shifting toward lifestyle-oriented, premium consumption (Statista, 2024).

2.2. Analytical framework

Building on the hypotheses developed in the previous section, this study proposes a conceptual research model grounded in the Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs) framework by Schmitt (1999), along with theoretical insights from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and consumer decision-making frameworks (Kotler, 2000). While the SEMs framework offers a comprehensive structure for operationalizing brand experience into five distinct dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, and social, Ajzen's theory emphasizes how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control come together to influence purchase behavior. Kotler's model, in turn, maps out the sequential stages of consumer decision-making, showing how experience-based evaluations impact problem recognition, information search, and ultimately, brand choice.

In synthesizing these theoretical contributions, the proposed model treats consumer purchase decisions as the dependent variable, directly influenced by four experiential dimensions. This model aligns well with the functional food industry context in Vietnam, where direct brand ownership of consumer touchpoints is limited. Still, experiential marketing through activations, events, and promotional campaigns is on the rise. By isolating the individual effects of each experience component, the model provides nuanced insights into which types of experiences are most effective in influencing brand choice. The study model is shown in Figure 1 as follows:

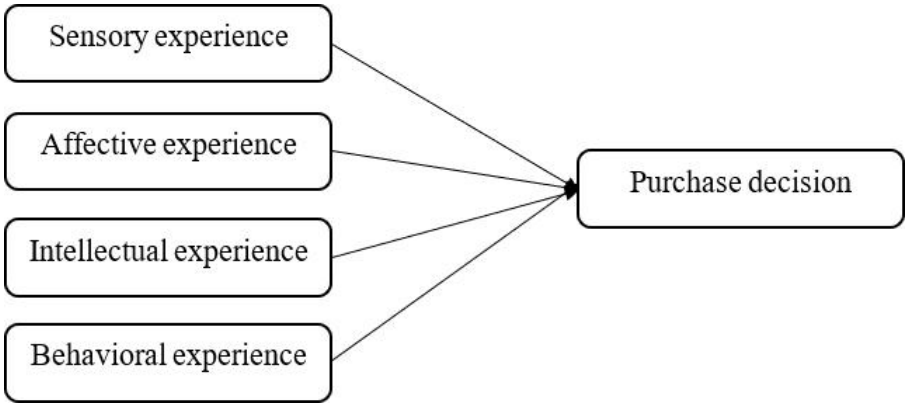

Figure 1: Research model

Source: Proposed by the author

2.3. Hypothesis development

Building on Schmitt's (1999) Strategic Experiential Modules and prior empirical studies, this research claims that four experiential dimensions, sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral, positively influence purchase decisions. The reasoning is based on two principles: experiential marketing is now key to brand differentiation in commoditized markets, and consumer choices are driven by holistic brand experiences rather than just rational evaluations (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Brakus et al., 2009).

Sensory experience includes visual, olfactory, tactile, or auditory stimuli that a brand creates during interactions with customers. According to Brakus et al. (2009), strong sensory stimuli help build brand differentiation and increase awareness. Hultén's (2011) research also shows that sensory experience directly influences brand evaluation and choice. In the realm of functional foods, factors like packaging, design, color, and taste can boost trust and attract consumers. Based on the above arguments, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1: Sensory experience has a positive influence on purchasing decisions.

Affective experiences represent the level of positive emotions a brand elicits in customers. According to Schmitt (1999), emotions are a key part of brand cohesion and driving behavior. Empirical research indicates that positive emotions boost purchase intent and brand engagement (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014; Nysveen et al., 2013). In the functional foods industry, where consumers are often cautious, positive emotions like a sense of security, trust, or satisfaction can directly influence

product purchasing behavior. Based on the above arguments, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H2: Affective experience has a positive influence on purchasing decisions.

Intellectual experience pertains to how much the brand stimulates the customer's thoughts, curiosity, or rational judgment (Brakus et al., 2009). Studies have shown that when brands prompt reflection or trust through clear, transparent information, customers tend to trust more and are more likely to make positive purchasing decisions (Zarantonello & Schmitt, 2010; Khan & Fatma, 2017). Especially in the functional foodindustry, where transparent information about quality, origin, and medical certification are crucial factors, intellectual experience significantly influences purchasing behavior. Based on the above arguments, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H3: Intellectual experience has a positive influence on purchasing decisions.

Behavioral experiences include actions a brand prompts, such as engaging, trying, or participating in brand activities. According to Schmitt (1999), experiences that motivate action enhance engagement and lead to higher conversion to purchasing. Research by Iglesias et al. (2011) and Khan and Fatma (2017) also shows that behavioral experiences are strong predictors of purchase intentions and decisions. In the dietary supplements field, activities like one-on-one consultations, trial experiences, and product demos help build trust and lower perceived risks.Based on the above arguments, the research hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H4: Behavioral experience has a positive influence on purchasing decisions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Measurement scales

To examine the effect of brand experience on purchase decisions, this study developed a measurement scale that covers four experiential dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral, along with the dependent variable, purchase decision. The items were adapted from Brakus et al. (2009), Cheung et al. (2021), Fikri and Silvianita (2021), and Yang (2023), with adjustments made for the Vietnamese functional foods market. Additionally, purchase decision, adapted from Kotler (2000) and Fikri and Silvianita (2021), was measured through preference, advocacy, and repurchase intentions. All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), consistent with consumer behavior research standards (Hair et al., 2010). The scale was pre-tested with marketing experts and revised for cultural relevance before conducting reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha and construct validity testing through EFA. The pilot results indicated that the scales achieved acceptable reliability, and the questionnaire was finalized before the official deployment.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data for the study was collected through a quantitative survey using a structured questionnaire, which aims to measure the components of brand experience and purchase decisions for functional foods products. The data collection process was carried out from March to August 2025 in Hai Phong city, a large consumer market in the Northern region, where the functional foods industry has a high growth rate and product brand diversity.

Respondents include consumers aged 18 and older who have purchased or used at least one functional foodin the past 12 months. This criterion aims to ensure that respondents have practical experience with brand engagement and purchase decisions, providing relevant data for the research objectives. The sample selection method used is convenience sampling, which includes direct surveys at pharmacies, functional food stores, shopping malls, and online surveys through popular local social networking platforms.

A total of 1000 questionnaires were distributed, and 850 were collected. After removing incomplete, inconsistent, or non-sampling response panels, 620 valid questionnaires remained for the formal analysis. The valid response rate reached 72.94%, satisfying the sample size requirements for multivariate regression analysis and factor analysis (Hair et al., 2010). The data are then encoded and processed using SPSS 26 software to verify scale reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and to test the research model.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The study sample included 620 consumers in Hai Phong city, of whom females made up a higher proportion (60%) than males (40%). In terms of age, most respondents were in the 25-45 year old group (59.8%), which is also a demographic with high demand for health care products. Regarding income level, more than half of the sample earned over 10 million VND per month (77.7%), aligning with the target customer profile of the functional food industry. The education level of the participants was relatively high, with 52.7% holding an undergraduate degree and 16.9% holding a postgraduate degree. Concerning occupation, office workers and self-employed individuals accounted for the largest share (39.2% and 22.7%, respectively), indicating a strong concern for health and stable purchasing power. These features demonstrate that the sample is diverse and representative of urban functional foodconsumers.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Characteristics	Items	Ratio (%)
Gender	Male	40.0
	Female	60.0
Age	Under 25 years old	10.0
	25-35 years old	27.9
	36-45 years old	31.9
	46-55 years old	20.5

Characteristics	Items	Ratio (%)
	Over 55 years old	9.7
Income	Under 10 million VND	22.3
	10-15 million VND	35.3
	15-20 million VND	24.2
	Over 20 million VND	18.2
Education	High school	11.6
	Intermediate/College	18.7
	University	52.7
	Postgraduate	16.9
Occupation	Office worker	39.2
	Freelance business	22.7
	Worker	13.6
	State officials	10.8
	Others	13.7

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

4.2. Reliability and Validity

The results of Cronbach's Alpha reliability test indicate that all values exceed 0.7, and no observed variables have a Corrected Item-Total Correlation below 0.3. Therefore, all scales that meet the Cronbach's Alpha criteria are included in the EFA analysis, as recommended by Hair et al. (2010).

The results of EFA of the independent variable shows a KMO of 0.858 (greater than 0.5), a significance level of 0.000 (less than 0.05), an Eigenvalue greater than 1, and factor loadings for the 16 observed variables greater than 0.5. These variables were extracted into 4 factors as originally proposed by the model. Additionally, the total variance explained reached 70.27%, which is greater than 50%, indicating that these 4 factors accounted for 70.27% of the variation in the data of the 16 observed variables participating in the EFA (see Table 2).

Table 2: EFA of independent variables

Items	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
AE3	0.890			
AE1	0.875			
AE4	0.860			
AE3	0.854			
BE4		0.893		
BE3		0.880		
BE1		0.862		
BE2		0.850		
IE2			0.895	
IE3			0.877	
IE1			0.858	
IE4			0.847	
SE3				0.889
SE4				0.874
SE1				0.861
SE2				0.844

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

The EFA results for the dependent variable show that the KMO value of 0.840 is above 0.5, and the significance of Bartlett's Test is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicating that the factor analysis is appropriate. One factor was extracted with an Eigenvalue of 2.213, which is greater than 1, and the cumulative explained variance is 68.56%, exceeding 50%. This factor accounts for 68.56% of the variance in the four observed variables involved in the EFA.

4.3. Correlation and multivariate linear regression analysis

The results of the correlation analysis showed that the significance of the Pearson correlation between the independent and dependent variables was less than 0.05. Therefore, there is a linear relationship between all four independent and dependent variables. Intellectual experience had the strongest correlation with purchase decision, with an r of 0.554, while sensory experience had the weakest correlation, with an r of 0.365 (see Table 3).

Table 3: Correlation analysis

	PD	SE	AE	IE	BE
PD	1				
SE	0.365**	1			
AE	0.445**	0.135*	1		
IE	0.554**	0.245**	0.209*	1	
BE	0.523**	0.189*	0.113**	0.137**	1

**p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

Notes: *PD = Purchase decision, SE = Sensory experience, AE = Affective experience, IE = Intellectual experience, BE = Behavioral experience*

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

The regression results in Table 4 show that the adjusted R^2 reached 0.689, indicating that the independent variables in the model could explain 68.9% of the purchase decision. At the same time, the analysis showed that the VIF was less than 5, indicating that the data did not violate the multicollinearity assumption. Additionally, the Durbin-Watson value of 1.921 falls within the range of 1.5 to 2.5, indicating no violation of the assumption of error independence. Furthermore, the t-values for the independent variables are less than 0.05, suggesting they are statistically significant.

Table 4: Regression results

Model		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	Constant	1.273	0.089		2.647	0.004		
	SE	0.245	0.087	0.314	2.827	0.025	0.782	1.938
	AE	0.312	0.085	0.378	2.923	0.005	0.773	2.218
	IE	0.356	0.084	0.424	2.627	0.002	0.790	1.839
	BE	0.345	0.086	0.400	2.289	0.001	0.728	1.827
Adjusted R^2 = 0.689, Sig. F = 0.000, Durbin-Watson = 1.921								
Notes: *PD = Purchase decision, SE = Sensory experience, AE = Affective experience, IE = Intellectual experience, BE = Behavioral experience*								

Source: Analysis results from SPSS 26

A regression equation with a standardized coefficient is expressed as follows:

PD = 0.424IE + 0.400BE + 0.378AE + 0.314SE

The standardized and unstandardized coefficients from the multiple linear regression analysis offer insight into the relative impact of each experiential factor on predicting purchase decisions (PD). As indicated in the regression output, all four independent variables showed statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable at $p < 0.05$. Therefore, hypotheses H1 through H4 are accepted.

4.4. Discussion

First of all, the results show that the intellectual experience has the strongest influence on purchase decisions ($\beta = 0.424$, $p = 0.002$). This indicates that when enterprises provide clear, logical, and persuasive information, consumers will feel more secure and confident in choosing brands. This finding aligns with the context of the functional food industry, which heavily relies on confidence in product quality, origin, and efficacy. Previous studies, such as Zarantonello and Schmitt (2010) or Khan and Fatma (2017), have also confirmed that raising awareness and providing transparent information are essential for helping consumers reduce perceived risk and make positive purchasing decisions.

Second, behavioral experience also has a relatively strong impact ($\beta = 0.400$, $p = 0.001$). This suggests that consumers' actual interactions with the brand, such as trial experiences, one-on-one consultations, access to customer service, or participation in communication activities, help build trust and encourage them to make purchase decisions. This finding aligns with experiential marketing theory (Schmitt, 1999), which highlights that active customer engagement is more likely to prompt purchase behavior than passive interactions.

Next, the affective experience also showed a significant impact ($\beta = 0.378$, $p = 0.005$), suggesting that positive emotions such as feelings of security, satisfaction, or sympathy for the brand play an important role in the decision to buy functional foods. This aligns with the view that consumer behavior is not only based on reason but is also strongly influenced by emotions (Ramaseshan & Stein, 2014). In the functional food industry, the level of health sensitivity increases the importance of positive beliefs and emotions.

Finally, sensory experience also had a positive effect ($\beta = 0.314$, $p = 0.025$), even though it was the lowest among the four variables. This indicates that factors like packaging design, color, taste, and brand image are not the most critical, but they still play an important role in capturing attention and creating a first impression on consumers. This aligns with studies on sensory marketing (Hultén, 2011), which highlight that the senses enhance brand recognition and help brands stand out in a competitive environment.

5. Implications

The study's results make important theoretical contributions by expanding and strengthening the brand experience model within the functional food industry, an area that has received little attention in international research and has yet to be examined in Vietnam. The demonstrated significant impact of the four dimensions of brand experience (sensory, emotional, intellectual, and behavioral) on purchasing decisions reaffirms the comprehensiveness of the brand experience scale proposed by Brakus et al. (2009) and extends its application to health-related products, where factors influencing consumption are more complex and driven by both reason and emotion. Notably, the study reveals that cognitive and behavioral experiences are key predictors of purchasing decisions, a finding that differs from most

previous research which tends to emphasize emotion in fast-moving consumer goods. This enriches consumer behavior theory by highlighting that real-world perception and interaction are especially critical for products like dietary supplements that rely on trust and transparent information.

Besides theoretical insights, research offers many practical management implications for enterprises in the functional food industry. First, the results show that enterprises need to focus on communication strategies and provide transparent, easy-to-understand, and convincing information to enhance the customers' intellectual experience, which are the factors that most influence buying decisions. This includes full disclosure of quality certifications, raw material sources, scientific evidence, and clear instructions for use. Next, enterprises should strengthen behavioral experience activities such as product trial programs, direct consultations, point-of-sale experiences, or building interactive activities on digital platforms. These activities help reduce perceived risks, build trust, and stand out in the competition. Additionally, enterprises should continue to improve the emotional and sensory experience through packaging design, brand image, and customer service to reinforce positive emotions and create a strong first impression.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the influence of four dimensions of brand experience, sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral, on consumer purchase decisions within the context of the functional foodindustry in Hải Phòng city. Based on the experiential marketing framework (Schmitt, 1999) and supported by empirical data from 650 consumers, the research findings offer valuable theoretical and practical insights.

Despite the many useful results, the study still has some limitations. The scope of the survey is only focused on Hai Phong city, so its ability to apply findings to other markets is limited. Scales based on self-report can be influenced by perceived bias. Therefore, future studies could expand the survey to multiple provinces, use a mixed-method approach, or include additional regulatory variables such as brand trust, product knowledge, or perceived risk to better understand the mechanisms of impact. These research directions will help strengthen and further develop the understanding of the role of brand experience in consumer behavior for healthcare products.

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