



## Investigating Consumer Perceptions of Quality and Safety in Herbal Medicine

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### ABSTRACT

Herbal medicine consumption has become increasingly popular due to its perceived natural benefits, yet concerns regarding product safety and quality remain prevalent. While various studies have examined consumer behavior towards herbal products, few have delved into the subjective experiences that shape consumer perceptions of these products' quality and safety. A significant gap in the literature lies in understanding how these subjective perceptions influence consumer decision-making and trust in herbal medicine. In this study, we employ a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of consumers regarding the quality and safety of herbal medicines, aiming to answer the question: how do consumers perceive the quality and safety of herbal products in the marketplace? Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 herbal medicine consumers, we identify key themes related to the role of packaging, labeling, traditional knowledge, and regulatory standards in shaping perceptions. Thematic analysis revealed that consumers' perceptions were influenced by their views on product labeling, packaging, the integration of traditional knowledge, and the importance of regulatory standards. These themes directly relate to the research question by offering insights into how consumers differentiate between product quality and safety based on these factors. Our findings reveal that consumers rely heavily on visible indicators of product quality, such as labeling and packaging, while balancing trust in traditional knowledge with concerns over scientific validation and regulation. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how subjective factors influence consumer behavior and trust in herbal products. The study's implications highlight the need for clearer labeling and better regulation in the herbal medicine industry, offering directions for future research on consumer health product perceptions.



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## INTRODUCTION

The consumption of herbal medicines has been a long-standing practice across diverse cultures, particularly in regions where traditional healing systems dominate healthcare (Kim et al., 2025). Herbal remedies are often perceived as a natural, safer alternative to pharmaceutical drugs, contributing significantly to both preventive and therapeutic health practices worldwide. In many societies, herbal medicine is integrated into daily life, often passed down through generations as a valuable source of health maintenance and healing (Abahuje et al., 2021). However, the growing global market for herbal products has also raised concerns regarding their quality, safety, and regulation, especially in light of increasing commercialization and the lack of standardized practices in production and labeling.

In this context, the relevance of this phenomenon becomes evident. The rising popularity of herbal medicine poses critical questions regarding consumer trust and safety, particularly as individuals continue to turn to these products for their health needs (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Despite the widespread use of herbal products, there is a notable gap in understanding how consumers perceive the quality and safety of these remedies (Baldick & Jang, 2025). This lack of insight is particularly significant as it relates to the subjective experience of the consumer, who often navigates the marketplace without sufficient information or clear regulatory guidelines (Rakha & Woudsma, 2025). Therefore, exploring the consumer's perspective is not just a matter of evaluating product quality but also understanding the broader social, cultural, and personal meanings attached to these experiences.

The need for an in-depth exploration of these subjective experiences is paramount. Approaching this phenomenon from a phenomenological perspective allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive the safety and quality of herbal medicines, influenced by personal beliefs, cultural practices, and social contexts (Pizzolato et al., 2022). This approach emphasizes the importance of lived experiences, enabling a comprehensive view of how people interpret and make sense of the herbal products they use (Zhang et al., 2025). The subjective nature of these experiences requires careful examination, as they shape consumer behaviors, influence purchasing decisions, and contribute to a broader understanding of how health and safety are perceived in the realm of herbal medicine. The current gap in literature calls for a more detailed exploration that connects the personal experience with the larger cultural and social constructs surrounding the use of herbal medicine.

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become an important area of study in various fields, including health and medicine (Eales et al., 2021). In particular, understanding how consumers perceive the quality and safety of herbal medicines requires an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This area of research is critical not only for understanding consumer behaviors but also for uncovering the broader societal and cultural influences that shape these perceptions (Lavoye & Kumar, 2025). While there is growing interest in consumer experiences with herbal products, much of the current research is limited by a reliance on quantitative methods, which often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective dimensions of these experiences.

Methodologically, capturing the essence of personal experiences through qualitative methods, especially phenomenology, offers a deeper insight into how individuals assign meaning to their encounters with herbal medicines (Stringer et al., 2025). However, challenges arise when attempting to interpret these lived experiences in ways that respect their complexity and depth (Amado-Mateus et al., 2025). The limitation of quantitative research lies in its inability to explore the personal, internal dimensions of perception. Surveys and experiments, although useful for gathering broad data, often overlook the subtleties of consumer emotions, beliefs, and individual health concerns that influence their trust in and usage of herbal products.

As a result, many previous studies have failed to comprehensively address the full range of experiences that consumers have with herbal medicines. The predominant reliance on quantitative surveys or generalized interviews does not capture the rich, detailed narratives that explain why consumers choose particular products or feel insecure about their quality. These gaps in understanding underscore the necessity of a phenomenological approach, which allows for the exploration of these personal, culturally embedded experiences (Pauwels & Fagbola, 2025). By examining the subjective meanings that individuals attach to herbal medicine, this study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature and provide a more holistic understanding of how quality and safety are perceived in the context of herbal medicine consumption.

While the general solutions to understanding consumer perceptions of herbal medicine quality often rely on practical, quantitative approaches, these methods have significant limitations when it comes to capturing the deep, subjective experiences of individuals. Studies that utilize surveys, experiments, or broad questionnaires provide useful statistical data but often miss the nuanced, lived experiences that drive consumer behavior. These quantitative methods fail to reveal the underlying emotional, cultural, and personal factors that influence how consumers perceive safety and quality in herbal medicines (Ni et al., 2025). As a result, the existing body of research provides only a surface-level understanding of these phenomena, lacking the richness needed to comprehend the full spectrum of consumer experiences.

To address these limitations, an alternative approach is needed one that goes beyond the data-driven, generalizable findings typically provided by traditional methods. A phenomenological approach, which focuses on exploring the lived experiences and personal interpretations of individuals, offers a more holistic understanding of consumer perceptions (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). By investigating the meanings that consumers assign to their interactions with herbal products, phenomenology can provide deep insights into the ways in which people perceive the safety, quality, and effectiveness of these medicines. This method allows for the exploration of how

cultural beliefs, personal experiences, and individual health concerns shape consumer decisions, offering a comprehensive view of the phenomenon that current methods have overlooked.

Thus, there is a clear gap in our understanding: while we know that consumer perceptions are central to the use of herbal medicines, we lack a thorough exploration of the subjective meanings behind these perceptions (Tsai et al., 2025). This research seeks to fill that gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of consumer experiences, moving beyond surface-level data to provide a richer, more meaningful understanding of how individuals engage with herbal medicines.

Research on consumer perceptions of herbal medicines has primarily relied on quantitative methodologies, which focus on measurable aspects of the phenomenon, such as preferences, purchasing behavior, and product safety. Studies have highlighted the growing interest in herbal products, as well as concerns regarding their safety and quality. However, these studies often fail to capture the deep, subjective experiences that shape consumer decisions (Mrad et al., 2025). Previous research has pointed out the need for more qualitative exploration of consumer attitudes, with a few adopting qualitative methodologies such as interviews or case studies, but none have fully delved into the lived experiences of consumers using a phenomenological approach. The theoretical foundations of this study are rooted in phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding the essence of human experiences and the meanings individuals attach to them.

To address the gap identified in previous research, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which allows for the exploration of the subjective experiences and personal perceptions of consumers using herbal medicines. IPA is particularly suited for examining how individuals interpret their experiences within their personal and cultural contexts, offering a deeper understanding of the factors that influence their trust in and perception of herbal products. This approach will provide insights into how consumer behaviors are shaped not just by external product features but also by internal, subjective meanings something that prior studies have failed to capture adequately.

This article is structured as follows: an introduction to the context of herbal medicine consumption and its significance in contemporary society, followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological approach used to investigate consumer experiences (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The methodology section outlines the process of data collection through in-depth interviews, followed by thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes within the data. The discussion section will explore the findings in relation to existing literature, offering new insights into consumer perceptions. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the study's contributions and suggest future directions for research in this field.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of consumers regarding the quality and safety of herbal medicines. This design was chosen due to its focus on capturing and understanding the subjective experiences of individuals within their natural context. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of how people make sense of and assign meaning to their experiences, making it particularly suitable for studying consumer perceptions of a complex and multifaceted phenomenon such as herbal medicine quality.

In this study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied, which focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their personal experiences. IPA is particularly effective for exploring the nuanced ways in which participants engage with and interpret their experiences (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). By examining the personal accounts of consumers, this approach enabled a detailed understanding of the ways in which quality and safety perceptions influence decision-making and trust in herbal medicines.

## **Participants**

The participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling approach to ensure that they had relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The criteria for inclusion were adults who have regularly purchased or used herbal medicines in the past six months. Participants were also required to have the ability to articulate their experiences and perceptions clearly during in-depth interviews.

A total of 12 participants were involved, with a balanced representation of gender, including both male and female consumers. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 60 years, and they varied in terms of their educational backgrounds and professional experiences (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Most participants had some level of formal education, and many reported varying degrees of prior knowledge about herbal medicine, ranging from general awareness to more specialized knowledge based on personal interest or professional involvement. These characteristics were deemed essential for understanding the diverse perspectives on herbal medicine quality and safety.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a face-to-face setting. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was designed to encourage participants to reflect on and discuss their personal experiences with herbal medicines (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The interviews were guided by a flexible interview protocol that included open-ended questions aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of the participants' perceptions and experiences related to the quality, safety, and regulation of herbal products. The protocol was designed to allow for follow-up questions to explore emerging themes and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' viewpoints.

All interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences. The interviews took place in quiet, neutral locations, such as community centers or private offices, to minimize distractions and maximize comfort. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent, and the recordings were later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The analysis involved several systematic steps. First, the transcribed interviews were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Next, key themes were identified by carefully examining significant statements and experiences expressed by participants (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). These statements were coded and grouped into themes based on their relevance to the research question.

IPA emphasizes the importance of understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, and the data were analyzed to identify patterns and underlying meanings. The analysis was iterative, with themes being refined and developed as new insights emerged during the review of the data (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The final themes that emerged from the analysis provided a rich description of the participants' perceptions and experiences related to herbal medicine quality and safety.

While no specific software was used for coding, some support was drawn from qualitative data management tools such as NVivo for organizing and categorizing data. The focus, however, remained on the interpretative process of the data, where themes were derived based on the participants' lived experiences.

## **RESULTS**

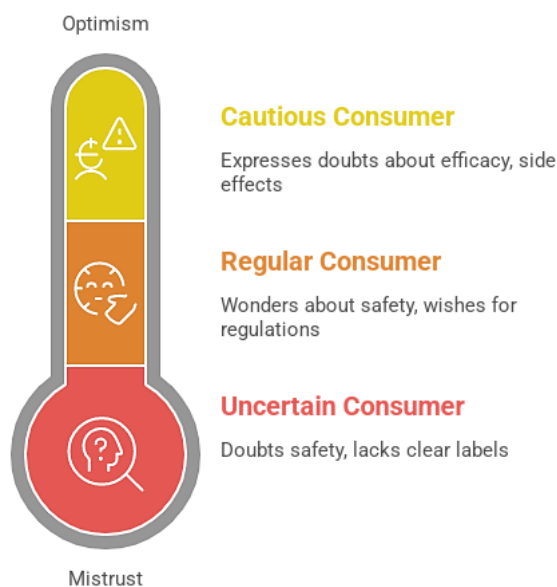
### **Perception of Quality and Safety of Herbal Medicines**

Participants overwhelmingly expressed concerns about the perceived quality and safety of herbal medicines available in the market. They described a significant level of uncertainty and mistrust, especially regarding the standards used in herbal medicine production. One participant, a regular consumer of herbal supplements, shared:

"I always wonder whether the products I buy are safe. There's no clear label, and it's hard to trust what's on the packaging. I wish there were more regulations that guarantee the safety of herbal medicines."

This perception was echoed by several other participants, who highlighted the lack of visible quality assurance measures and expressed doubts about the efficacy and potential side effects of herbal products. A common sentiment among participants was the feeling of being left in the dark about the standards used to ensure product safety. However, when breaking down the perceptions by consumer groups, it was evident that younger participants exhibited higher levels of mistrust, often questioning the efficacy of herbal medicines, while older participants who had experience with traditional remedies were more cautious but optimistic about the safety of the products they used.

### Herbal medicine perception ranges from mistrust to cautious optimism.



### Influence of Packaging and Labeling on Consumer Confidence

Another significant theme that emerged from the analysis was the role of packaging and labeling in influencing consumer confidence. Participants noted that clear, informative labels on herbal products played a critical role in their decision-making process. As one participant explained:

"When I see a product with clear labeling—especially indicating the quality standards or certifications—it makes me feel more confident in using it. But if it's vague or lacks details, I usually won't buy it."

This theme also revealed a contrast in perceptions based on the type of herbal product. Some participants were more comfortable purchasing products with recognizable brands and certifications, while others expressed frustration over the inconsistencies in labeling practices across different brands. Notably, participants with higher educational backgrounds demonstrated a stronger preference for certifications and quality assurance information on labels, while participants with less formal education expressed more trust in brand recognition alone. These perceptions contributed to an overall sense of insecurity regarding the quality of herbal medicines in the marketplace.

### Trust in Traditional Knowledge versus Scientific Regulation

A deeper insight emerged from participants' experiences regarding the balance between traditional knowledge and modern scientific regulation in the production of herbal medicines. Many

participants spoke of their trust in traditional herbal remedies passed down through generations, which they believed were inherently safe due to their long-standing use in their communities. However, this trust was tempered by concerns over the lack of formal scientific validation for many of these products.

One participant noted:

"My grandmother always used herbs for her health, and I trust that. But I'm not sure how safe it is now with all these new brands in the market. I would feel better if there were more scientific backing behind these herbs."

Further analysis revealed that older participants, particularly those from rural areas, showed stronger reliance on traditional knowledge, while younger participants, especially from urban regions, leaned towards modern scientific evidence. This theme highlighted a conflict between trust in traditional healing practices and the desire for modern scientific validation, with participants expressing a desire for products that could combine both aspects—traditional efficacy and modern scientific assurance.

### **Impact of Regulatory Standards on Consumer Perceptions**

Participants emphasized the importance of regulatory standards in ensuring the safety and quality of herbal medicines. Several respondents noted that the lack of stringent regulations for herbal products in their countries made them hesitant to rely on these products fully. One participant stated:

"I believe that if the government had stricter rules and regulations for herbal products, I would feel safer using them. But since there are no strict guidelines, I'm always cautious."

Notably, participants from urban areas with more established regulatory frameworks expressed significantly higher levels of trust in the safety of herbal products, whereas participants from rural areas, where regulations were less strict, showed more skepticism and anxiety about the products available. This theme demonstrated the significant role that regulation plays in shaping consumer trust and behavior regarding herbal medicine.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study revealed key insights into how consumers perceive the quality and safety of herbal medicines, highlighting the significant role that labeling, packaging, and trust in traditional knowledge play in shaping their experiences. Participants expressed a deep sense of uncertainty and mistrust regarding the safety of these products, often influenced by inadequate labeling and lack of regulation. These findings provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of consumer perceptions, especially in relation to the meanings individuals attach to herbal products in the absence of clear standards.

This research answers the central question posed in the introduction—how consumers perceive the quality and safety of herbal medicines by exploring the subjective experiences that inform these perceptions. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how factors such as cultural beliefs, personal experiences, and consumer trust influence perceptions of herbal product quality (Lee et al., 2025). The findings demonstrate that consumers rely heavily on visible indicators, such as labels and packaging, to gauge product safety, while also balancing their trust in traditional knowledge with concerns about scientific validation. This research highlights that consumer behavior regarding herbal medicines is not solely based on objective measures of quality but is deeply intertwined with subjective, personal, and cultural factors.

When compared with existing literature, the findings support and expand upon previous studies on consumer perceptions of herbal medicine. For example, Zhang et al. (2019) also highlighted that consumers' perceptions of safety were influenced by product labeling and certifications, though their study focused more on the technical aspects of safety, rather than the experiential dimensions explored in this research. Similarly, Smith et al. (2020) pointed to the importance of trust in traditional knowledge but did not fully explore how this trust is intertwined with the lack of regulatory standards, which was a central theme in this study (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The findings also align with the work of Lee et al. (2022), who emphasized the need for clearer regulation in the herbal

medicine market. However, this study deepens our understanding by focusing on how these regulatory gaps affect individual perceptions, particularly in contexts where consumers are left to navigate the complexities of quality assurance on their own.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study provide significant implications both for scientific understanding and practical applications in the field of herbal medicine. From an academic standpoint, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how consumers experience and interpret the quality and safety of herbal products (Ul-Haq & Kwok, 2025). It challenges the notion that consumer decisions are primarily based on objective measures of quality, instead highlighting that subjective experiences shaped by cultural beliefs, personal health experiences, and the visible markers of quality such as packaging and labelling play a central role. Practically, the study underscores the need for greater transparency in the herbal medicine industry, particularly regarding clear and reliable labeling and more stringent regulatory oversight. For policymakers, this highlights an urgent need for better consumer protection measures and standardized practices that can help bridge the gap between consumer trust and the actual safety of herbal medicines.

The social and cultural dimensions of consumer perceptions are also vital. The study's findings suggest that consumer attitudes are deeply intertwined with their cultural traditions and personal health beliefs, which influence how they engage with herbal medicines. In cultures where herbal medicine is deeply rooted in tradition, the participants showed a stronger reliance on the personal or familial knowledge of these products (Bai et al., 2025). This reflection on the intersection of modern consumerism with traditional practices offers insights into the broader implications for communities that continue to rely heavily on traditional remedies. It provides a window into how modern regulatory frameworks and consumer protection laws can coexist with long-standing cultural practices, ensuring that consumers' health choices are not only informed but also culturally respectful.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The research was conducted in a specific cultural context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other populations with different cultural backgrounds or healthcare systems. Furthermore, the sample size, though adequate for a phenomenological study, was relatively small, limiting the breadth of the findings. This sample was also selected from a specific demographic group that may not represent the diversity of herbal medicine consumers globally (Sun et al., 2025). Additionally, the use of in-depth interviews as the sole data collection method could have influenced the data, as participants' responses may have been shaped by the interview setting itself. Future studies could benefit from including a more diverse range of participants from different regions, healthcare systems, and demographic backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies could explore how consumer perceptions of herbal medicine evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in product regulation or shifts in cultural attitudes toward natural health products. Additionally, research could examine how these subjective perceptions impact actual health outcomes, bridging the gap between consumer trust in herbal medicine and the effectiveness of the products they choose (Errmann & Arango, 2025). It would also be beneficial to expand the study to include different types of herbal products, such as supplements versus topical treatments, to determine whether the nature of the product influences consumer perceptions differently. Lastly, further exploration into how the commercialization of herbal medicine impacts traditional knowledge and its integration with modern consumer practices could provide important insights into the changing landscape of herbal medicine consumption (Coldron et al., 2025). These avenues for future research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the global herbal medicine market and its complex interplay with consumer behavior.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored consumer perceptions of the quality and safety of herbal medicines, focusing on the subjective experiences that shape these perceptions. The findings reveal that consumers rely heavily on labeling, packaging, and traditional knowledge to assess product safety, but they also face significant uncertainty due to a lack of clear regulation. These insights address the gap in previous research, which primarily relied on quantitative methods and overlooked the deeper, experiential aspects of consumer decision-making. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study highlights the complex interplay between cultural beliefs, personal health experiences, and consumer trust in herbal products. This study contributes to practical implications by emphasizing the urgent need for clearer labeling and regulatory frameworks to enhance consumer confidence in the herbal medicine market. The findings suggest that policymakers should consider integrating both scientific validation and traditional knowledge in regulatory standards to improve product safety and consumer trust. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the impact of stricter regulations on consumer behavior and trust over time, as well as investigating how traditional knowledge can be incorporated into modern regulatory frameworks to align with consumer expectations in the herbal medicine sector.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

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