Session Overview
Perspectives on Consumer Health Issues: Theoretical, Methodological, and Policy Insights
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Using health as a context for gaining insight into consumer behavior issues offers a number of opportunities. First, health information and health behaviors are inherently uncertain. This is the case because of the long time horizons associated with health outcomes which makes the effectiveness of health behaviors difficult to evaluate, because most consumers lack the expertise to evaluate the veracity of health information, and because conflicting messages are often available in the marketplace and media. Second, health is an interdisciplinary area (Moorman and Matulich 1993). Research, as a result, tends to offer insights relating to various physiological, psychological, and social dimensions of health. These perspectives require consumer researchers who study health phenomena to accept a multidimensional view of consumer behavior and to integrate often conflicting perspectives when creating theory.

The session explored several themes. The first is the role of motivation in consumers' decision to engage in uncertain behaviors (like health behaviors). Focusing on "protection motivation" which arouses, sustains, and directs health activities, Block and Anand suggested that the motivation to engage in health behaviors depends in part on consumers' readiness to act. Moorman investigated the effect of health values on consumers' health behaviors, comparing the activating effect of health values to the effect of health motivation described in Moorman and Matulich (1993). Hill et al. deconstructed the abortion experience in terms of factors predisposing pregnant consumers to undergo this procedure. Finally, Cole and Balasubramanian addressed the issue of the role of motivation to process nutrition information, finding that as motivation increases so does inspection of nutrition panels.

A second theme is the role of control in health decisions. Moorman identified two types of health control — behavioral control and health locus of control — and investigated their interaction in health outcomes. Block and Anand examined the impact of a third type of control, termed perceived efficacy, that refers to the extent to which consumers perceive that following the recommended health behavior will be efficacious in ameliorating the harm. Hill et al. explored the effect of perceived control (i.e., responsibility) over the decision to abort as it relates to post-abortion experiences. Finally, Cole and Balasubramanian found that as consumers become more knowledgeable, they perceive greater control over their health. Paradoxically, the control that this knowledge affords is actually a detriment to further health actions.

A third theme contained either explicitly or implicitly in these four studies is the impact of gender on health issues. By selecting mammography and abortion decisions, Block and Anand and Hill et al. addressed gender-specific health decisions, although clearly there are inputs from and impacts on men in the case of abortion decisions. Moorman examined the effects of gender on health behaviors and the extent to which gender and health motivation interact to influence health behaviors. Similarly, Cole and Balasubramanian noted the effects of gender on nutrition information use.

Another theme implicit in the session is the difference between prevention-oriented health behaviors and those that are detection-oriented or curative-oriented. Two of the studies, Cole and Balasubramanian and Moorman, focused on preventive health behaviors and assessed the types of consumer characteristics that correlate with them. Block and Anand focused on mammography screening, which is both preventive (to the extent that it reduces mortality rates if cancer is detected) and curative (because it detects disease already present). Finally, Hill et al. also highlighted consumers' attitudes toward prevention — in this case, birth control activities — that are reported as failed by over 80% of the study's informants.

The final theme relates to the important policy implications indicated by these studies. Three of the studies have direct implications for the design and implementation of health promotion campaigns. Block and Anand's study provided insights into creating more effective public service advertisements aimed at persuading women to follow mammography recommendations. Cole and Balasubramanian suggested that nutrition information should be designed to increase consumers' motivation to process nutrition information and to minimize nutrition knowledge's negative effects. Moorman indicated the importance of attending to individual differences when designing health programs. Finally, Hill et al.'s study may have indirect policy implications because it provided a perspective on the decision makers' view of the abortion experience that informs public policy and it gave insight into the deeply personal and conflicted nature of this act.

REFERENCE