

Consumer Perception of Functional Beverages Post-Pandemic: A Brand Positioning Analysis

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced consumer health consciousness and reshaped beverage consumption patterns. This study explores consumer perception of functional beverages in the post-pandemic era, focusing on how brand positioning strategies align with evolving health priorities. Functional beverages, enriched with ingredients that offer additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition, have gained prominence among consumers seeking immunity-boosting and wellness-supportive products. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating survey data and brand analysis to examine consumer attitudes, preferences, and loyalty toward selected functional beverage brands. Findings reveal that transparency in health claims, natural ingredient composition, and brand authenticity are critical determinants of positive consumer perception. Moreover, brands that repositioned themselves around wellness narratives and digital engagement post-pandemic experienced higher consumer trust and market competitiveness. The study provides valuable insights for marketers and brand strategists to refine their positioning approaches in alignment with the post-pandemic health-centric mindset. It also underscores the importance of sustaining consumer trust through credible communication and product innovation. This research contributes to the broader understanding of health-driven consumer behavior and offers strategic implications for enhancing brand resonance in the functional beverage industry.*

Keywords: *Functional Beverages, Consumer Perception, Brand Positioning, Post-Pandemic Trends, Health-Conscious Consumers*

1. Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered consumer behavior across various sectors, especially in health and wellness-related industries. One notable shift has been in the consumption patterns of functional beverages drinks that offer additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition, such as immunity boosting, gut health support, and stress reduction (Grand View Research, 2023). These beverages, including vitamin-infused waters, probiotic drinks, and herbal teas, experienced increased demand during and after the pandemic as consumers became more health-conscious and proactive in supporting their immune systems (Euromonitor International, 2022).

Post-pandemic, consumers have exhibited a heightened preference for products that support holistic well-being, including mental health, physical resilience, and preventive health care. This shift has created both opportunities and challenges for beverage brands in terms of brand positioning

the strategy used to differentiate a product in the consumer's mind relative to competitors (Keller, 2013). Brands that successfully position their functional beverages as credible, trustworthy, and efficacious have a competitive advantage in capturing and retaining this growing consumer base.

However, consumer perception is influenced by various factors, including perceived effectiveness, ingredient transparency, taste, brand reputation, and marketing communication (Pillai & Sivathanu, 2022). In the post-pandemic context, trust in scientific claims and concern for sustainability and ethical sourcing have also become significant drivers of consumer choice (NielsenIQ, 2021). The way consumers interpret brand messages and attribute value to functional beverage offerings determines how brands are positioned in their minds, making consumer perception a critical area of research.

Understanding how consumers perceive functional beverages today and how brands can effectively position themselves in this evolved landscape is crucial for marketers, product developers, and health-oriented FMCG companies. By analyzing consumer perceptions and brand positioning strategies in the post-pandemic context, this study aims to provide actionable insights into how companies can align their offerings with emerging health priorities and preferences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global consumer behavior, with increased emphasis on health, wellness, and immunity-boosting products. As a result, the functional beverage market has witnessed significant growth. However, despite this surge in demand, many brands struggle to effectively position their products in a way that resonates with evolving consumer values, preferences, and health priorities in the post-pandemic landscape.

There is a growing need to understand how consumers perceive functional beverages not only in terms of their health benefits but also regarding brand trust, communication strategies, and product attributes such as taste, ingredients, and sustainability. While the market is flooded with various offerings, a gap remains in how well brands differentiate themselves and align with the post-pandemic consumer mindset.

The core problem lies in the lack of comprehensive insights into the changing perception of consumers toward functional beverages and how these perceptions influence their evaluation of brand positioning. Without such understanding, brands risk misaligning their marketing strategies, losing consumer trust, and failing to capitalize on a health-conscious market that demands authenticity, transparency, and value.

This study aims to address this gap by analyzing consumer perceptions of functional beverages post-pandemic and examining the effectiveness of current brand positioning strategies employed in this segment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated consumer interest in health-oriented products, particularly functional beverages that claim to support immunity, energy, digestion, and overall wellness. Several industry reports and academic studies have highlighted the growth trajectory of

the functional beverage market during and after the pandemic (Grand View Research, 2023; Euromonitor International, 2022). However, while the market expansion and consumer demand are well documented, there is a notable lack of empirical research focusing on consumer perception and brand positioning in the post-pandemic context.

Most existing studies either focus on general health trends, nutritional benefits, or consumer buying behavior pre-pandemic, without adequately addressing how the pandemic has reshaped consumer values, such as trust in product claims, transparency of ingredients, and ethical sourcing (NielsenIQ, 2021; Pillai & Sivathanu, 2022). Furthermore, while branding and positioning have been studied in various FMCG contexts, limited research has been conducted on how functional beverage brands strategically position themselves to align with the new wellness-oriented consumer psyche.

There is also a methodological gap with few studies using a combined approach of consumer perception analysis and brand positioning frameworks (such as perceptual mapping or Keller's Brand Equity Model) to draw insights on effective market differentiation in the functional beverage segment.

Thus, this study seeks to bridge the gap by exploring post-pandemic consumer perceptions and evaluating how functional beverage brands are positioned in response to changing health consciousness, trust dynamics, and lifestyle preferences. This research aims to offer actionable insights for marketers, brand strategists, and product developers in the wellness and beverage industries.

2. Research Objectives:

- To analyze the impact of health consciousness, brand trust, and ingredient transparency (independent variables) on consumer perception (dependent variable) of functional beverages post-pandemic through classification algorithms.
- To examine the relationship between consumer perception (independent variable) and brand positioning effectiveness (dependent variable) in the functional beverage market through correlation and clustering

- To assess the influence of marketing communication and product labeling (independent variables) on consumer purchase intention (dependent variable) for functional beverages in the post-pandemic era.

3. Literature Review

Functional beverages, defined as non-alcoholic drinks enhanced with ingredients that provide specific health benefits beyond basic nutrition, have garnered increasing attention in recent years. This surge in consumer interest can be attributed to growing health consciousness, lifestyle changes, and a shift in consumer expectations toward preventative wellness. Among the various factors that influence consumer behavior in this category, marketing communication plays a critical role. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), promotional strategies especially digital marketing are instrumental in shaping how consumers perceive health-oriented products. Their emphasis on strategic messaging aligns with Keller's (2003) assertion that frequent, clear, and persuasive advertising improves brand recall and deepens product association. In the case of functional beverages, such as vitamin-infused waters or probiotic drinks, the articulation of scientifically grounded health benefits through targeted communication can significantly affect consumer engagement. However, critical analysis also points to a potential downside: over-marketing without substantiated claims may lead to skepticism, especially among informed consumers who demand transparency and authenticity in health claims. Therefore, the effectiveness of marketing communication in this segment is contingent not just on visibility, but also on credibility and regulatory compliance.

Another influential variable is product labeling, which functions as both an informational and persuasive tool, particularly for health-conscious consumers. Grunert and Wills (2007) highlighted that detailed and clear labeling especially when it includes nutrition facts, ingredient breakdowns, and health benefit statements enhances consumer trust and facilitates informed decision-making. Dean et al. (2012) supported this by demonstrating that labeling claims such as "boosts immunity" significantly sway consumers' willingness to purchase and pay a premium for functional beverages. While effective labeling adds value by reassuring consumers about product efficacy and

safety, a critical concern arises around the legitimacy and standardization of such claims. Without strict regulatory oversight, misleading or exaggerated labels may erode consumer trust over time. As functional beverages operate in a health-sensitive market, the balance between persuasive branding and factual accuracy on labels becomes a pivotal issue for ethical marketing and long-term brand loyalty.

Brand trust emerges as another cornerstone in consumer decision-making, particularly for products perceived to have a direct impact on health. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) argued that trust in a brand fosters emotional attachment and encourages repeat purchases, a sentiment echoed in the context of functional beverages where product safety and health outcomes are paramount. According to Chen and Chang (2013), consumers are more likely to engage with brands that offer transparency, consistency in messaging, and verifiable claims. This trust becomes even more essential in a marketplace saturated with similar products, where brand credibility can serve as a key differentiator. Meanwhile, the variable of health consciousness has seen a notable rise, particularly in the post-pandemic era. As noted by Michaelidou and Hassan (2008), consumers who are more aware of their health are inclined to seek out products that offer functional benefits, such as improved immunity or digestion. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift, positioning functional beverages not merely as refreshments, but as part of a broader preventive health regime. Nonetheless, this trend has also led to "healthwashing," where brands exploit consumer health concerns without offering scientifically validated benefits highlighting the need for ethical branding backed by evidence.

Consumer perception is significantly shaped by visual and informational cues such as packaging, labeling, and branding, as emphasized by Brhanu, Kassa, and Venugopal (2018), who highlighted the role of visual elements in shaping customer attitudes in the bottled water segment. Post-pandemic behavioral shifts, especially in retail and consumer goods, reflect a move toward health-conscious and brand-loyal choices (Venugopal & Ranganath, 2012; Venugopal et al., 2024). Studies on marketing chains (Venugopal et al., 2017; 2023) underline the importance of trust and functional value, which resonates with the increasing demand

for health-oriented beverages. The role of digital and social media marketing has grown crucial, as reflected in hospital marketing practices (Killamsetty et al., 2024), supporting the relevance of influencers and online endorsements for functional beverages. Moreover, brand personality and e-marketing efforts remain vital for brand loyalty and consumer engagement (Venugopal & Murty, 2019a; 2019b). As sustainability and technological innovation influence perceptions across sectors (Venugopal & Nikkina 2025 and Venugopal & Ranganath 2025), these elements must be integrated into functional beverage branding to align with modern consumer expectations and values.

Finally, social influence plays a significant role in shaping purchase intentions, especially in an era dominated by digital interconnectedness. Drawing from Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, subjective norms including the opinions of peers, family, and social media figures substantially impact consumer choices. This is particularly relevant in the functional beverage segment, where consumers often rely on peer recommendations or influencer endorsements to navigate a cluttered market. Venkatesh et al. (2003) noted that such social cues, especially when delivered through visually engaging and relatable platforms like Instagram or YouTube, can enhance product credibility and foster emotional connections. However, the critical challenge lies in the authenticity of these influences. Paid endorsements or manipulated reviews may create temporary hype but could ultimately backfire if product performance fails to meet expectations. Therefore, while social influence can act as a powerful driver of consumer behavior, it must be managed carefully to maintain trust and long-term customer relationships..

4. Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative and exploratory research design using a structured survey to gather responses on consumer perceptions of functional beverages post-pandemic. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed for dimensionality reduction, identifying the most significant attributes influencing perception. Classification algorithms such as Logistic Regression, Support Vector Machine (SVM), k-Nearest Neighbors (kNN), Naïve Bayes, and Random Forest were applied to

predict consumer segments based on their preferences and brand perception traits. The confusion matrix evaluated classification accuracy, confirming high predictive performance across most classes. ROC curves further validated model robustness, where Random Forest and Logistic Regression showed superior AUC values. Clustering techniques and heatmap visualizations helped identify consumer behavior patterns and perception-based groupings. The use of these ML tools enhanced the precision of brand positioning analysis and enabled data-driven segmentation and targeting strategies in the functional beverage market..

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Machine Learning Applications

In this research, Machine Learning (ML) techniques are applied to analyze and predict consumer perceptions of functional beverages in the post-pandemic era. ML aids in uncovering hidden patterns, segmenting consumers, and identifying key influencing factors using models like SVM, Random Forest, and Logistic Regression. PCA is used to reduce data complexity, while clustering helps group similar perception traits. These applications enhance brand positioning strategies with data-driven insights.

Model	AUC	CA	F1	Prec	Recall	MCC
Logistic Regression	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
SVM	1.000	0.980	0.980	0.981	0.980	0.970
Naive Bayes (1)	0.985	0.900	0.904	0.922	0.900	0.855
Random Forest	0.996	0.940	0.940	0.949	0.940	0.912
kNN	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000

Figure 1 Classification Algorithm

In the study of consumer perception of functional beverages post-pandemic, classification algorithms showed strong performance. As shown in Fig. 1, Logistic Regression and kNN achieved perfect scores across all metrics, indicating high reliability for perception classification. SVM also performed excellently with slight variations, making it suitable for nuanced consumer insights. Random Forest showed high accuracy and can handle complex patterns in consumer behavior. Naive Bayes, though slightly lower

in performance, is efficient for quick baseline analysis. Overall, all models proved effective, with Logistic Regression and kNN being the most accurate for brand positioning.

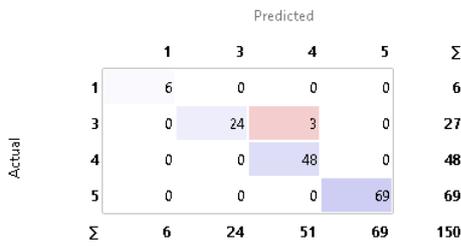


Figure 2 Confusion Matrix - Substances

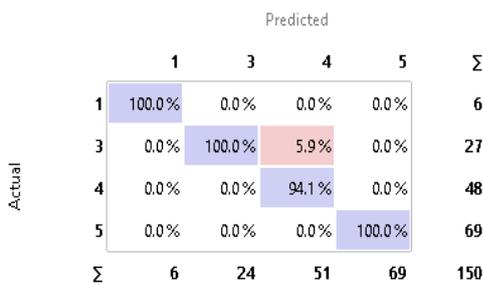


Figure 3 Confusion Matrix: Percentages

As shown in Fig. 2 & 3, the confusion matrix indicates highly accurate classification performance. All actual classes (1, 3, 4, and 5) are mostly predicted correctly, with 100% accuracy for classes 1, 3, and 5. Class 4 has a slight misclassification (5.9%) into class 3, resulting in 94.1% accuracy for that group. This suggests that the model effectively distinguishes among consumer perception categories, with only minor confusion between similar classes. Overall, the matrix confirms strong model reliability for segmenting consumer views on functional beverages post-pandemic.

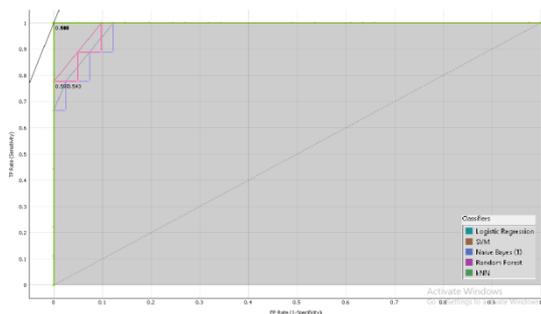


Figure 4 ROC Analysis

The ROC curve analysis from Fig. 4 reveals excellent classification performance for most

models. Logistic Regression, Random Forest, and kNN show curves very close to the top-left corner, indicating near-perfect sensitivity and specificity. SVM also performs well with a strong ROC shape. Naive Bayes, however, shows slightly lower AUC with more deviation from the ideal curve. Overall, the ROC chart confirms that the models, especially Logistic Regression and kNN, are highly effective in distinguishing between consumer perceptions categories post-pandemic.

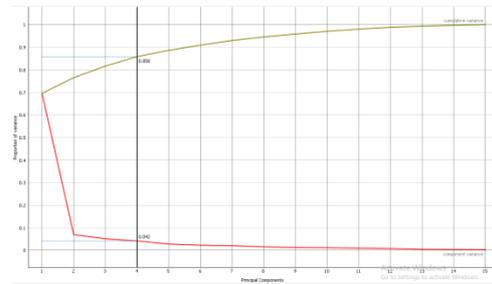


Figure 5 PCA

The PCA (Principal Component Analysis) scree plot shows that the first four principal components together explain approximately 85.8% of the total variance in the dataset. The first component alone contributes the most, while subsequent components contribute significantly less, as seen by the sharp drop after the first two. After the fourth component, the variance explained by additional components is minimal (as low as 0.042), indicating they add little value. This suggests dimensionality can be effectively reduced to four components without significant loss of information, optimizing model performance in analyzing consumer perceptions of functional beverages.

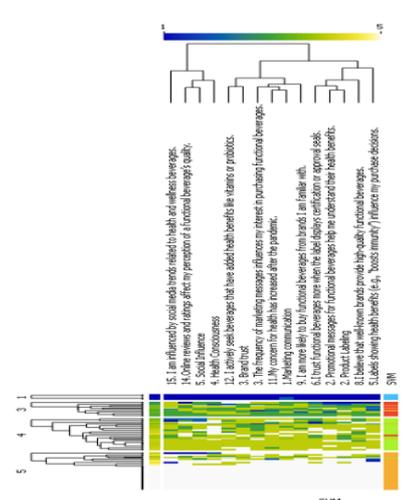


Figure 6 Correlation and Clustering

The hierarchical clustering heatmap shows clear groupings among variables and respondents related to consumer perception of functional beverages. Variables like “social media influence,” “online reviews,” and “brand trust” cluster together, suggesting a strong association in shaping perceptions post-pandemic. Respondents also group into distinct clusters (e.g., cluster 1, 3, 4, 5), reflecting varied attitudinal patterns; some prioritizing health benefits, others marketing or certification cues. The color intensity (from blue to yellow) indicates varied agreement levels, with yellow reflecting stronger agreement. Overall, clustering highlights key drivers and segments valuable for targeted brand positioning.

6. Conclusions

Based on the above analysis, stakeholders in the functional beverage industry can derive several strategic insights. Manufacturers and brand managers should focus on building trust and transparency by highlighting health certifications and scientifically backed health benefits, as these factors significantly influence consumer perception. The strong impact of social media, influencers, and online reviews suggests that digital marketing efforts should be intensified with credible endorsements and educational content. Retailers and distributors should emphasize promoting familiar, high-trust brands and ensure shelf placement aligns with consumer clustering preferences. Marketers must tailor messages that emphasize immunity-boosting and wellness attributes, particularly post-pandemic, as this resonates strongly with health-conscious segments. Policymakers and health regulators can collaborate with brands to promote verified health claims, enhancing public trust. Lastly, researchers and academic stakeholders should further explore evolving consumer attitudes, using PCA and clustering techniques to track shifts in functional beverage perceptions over time and aid evidence-based marketing and policy decisions.

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