

Marketing Communication Influencing Perceptions of Banana Flour Purchasing Decisions

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Thailand is well known for its delicious and decorative desserts made from rice and banana flour. But one of the main ingredients, banana flour, is less known in the Western world. Banana flour is actually the starch of green bananas (*Musa spp.*) and was historically used in tropical countries in place of wheat flour. Banana starch is predicted to reach a market value of US\$730 million by the end of 2027. Banana flour is a resistant starch that passes through the intestine undigested and therefore offers a number of health benefits for the treatment of obesity and diabetes. However, consumers need to be made aware of the cost benefit analysis of banana flour through marketing communication. This quantitative research project focused on the market communication influence on the perceptions of banana flour shoppers and their purchasing decisions. It concentrated on the perceptions of the banana flour shoppers. The main focus points of the research were: consumer perspectives on advertising, public relations, marketing activities, word of mouth, sales promotion and direct marketing. We also explored consumer attitudes towards and perceptions of banana flour, which were all positive although the purchasing behaviour was lacking. It is hoped to replicate this study at other retail outlets in Thailand and in neighbouring countries, as well as around the world.

Key words: *Banana flour, banana starch, marketing communication, Marcom, musa.*

Introduction

This article discusses the perceptions and attitudes of consumers towards marketing communication influencing the intention to purchase banana flour. Most consumers are unaware of banana flour, which is also referred to as banana starch. Green unripe bananas contain up to 80 per cent starch measured in dry weight. In ripe bananas, this starch has been converted into sugar and fully ripened bananas may only have 1 per cent starch. (Zhang et al.,

2005). Banana flour a resistant starch, which is a fermentable fibre that passes through the intestines undigested. This offers a number of health benefits in the treatment of obesity and type 2 diabetes, as well as reducing the risks of colon cancer. In addition, banana flour contains insulin and insoluble fibres, which act as prebiotics. Another advantage of banana flour is that it is gluten free. It has also been advertised as weight loss friendly.

A new report has highlighted that banana starch may reach a market value of US\$730 million by the end of 2027 with its various applications from feed to food, with household use representing a small percentage compared with the food and beverage industry, which is a major user of the banana starch (New Food, 2019). The current price of this flour is still relatively high and may retail for 350 to 450 Thai baht per pound. The consumer has to be careful with price comparisons, as some packages only have 14 ounces (396 grams), even though they may look like one pound packages. In comparison, corn starch retails for 25 baht and tapioca starch for about 30 baht per pound; even imported wheat flour is cheaper depending on the retail outlet. Not many people are aware of the benefits of the product and are therefore unable to make a cost benefit analysis. Marketing communication is required and the most effective form of such communication is yet to be determined.



Note: obtained from <https://irenamacri.com/green-banana-flour-benefits-uses>

Figure 1. Banana flour uses and benefits

Literature Review

The literature review related to this study looked at multiple aspects of marketing banana flour. The first part explored what banana flour is and how it is made and distributed. We then looked at the marketing aspects of banana flour and in particular at the components of marketing communication.

First, it is important to understand why banana flour is important. Bananas (*musa spp.*) are one of the most widely spread fruits on Earth, especially in tropical countries from Africa, across Asia to America. Bananas are also referred to as ‘green gold’. Green bananas are up to

80 per cent starch (Stover & Simmonds, 2003). This starch has a wide range of uses, from industrial food production to household uses. Aurore, Parfait and Fahrasmane (2009) explored green bananas as raw materials for making processed food products. Household uses are mostly cakes and bread making, as well as children's food and dietary products. Loong and Wong (2018) looked at applications for Chinese steamed bread fortified with green banana flour.

Banana has been considered an alternate source of indigestible carbohydrates because of its dietary fibre and resistant starch, which is the opposite of rapidly digestible starch, with a digestion rate of 20 minutes (Stresses et al., 2006). RDS is a starch that is quickly broken down and immersed in the duodenum and proximal regions in the small bowel. This contributes to a boost in blood glucose levels with the resultant effect of hyperglycemia (Juarez et al., 2006).

To obtain the flour, the fruits were cut, immersed in sodium meta-bisulphite, dehydrated and ground (Borges et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2005). Foods incorporating banana flour generally have poorer sensory properties affecting consumer acceptability (Menrad, 2003). This is a severe handicap when it comes to marketing these functional foods.



Source: Future Market Insights 2017

Figure 2. Banana flour market value

Marketing communication uses a variety of marketing tools and channels to reach a desired target market. It includes branding, advertisement, promotions, personal selling, direct marketing and online marketing and communication. (Krizan et al., 2008). In marketing communication, we address the 4Ps of marketing: product, price, place and especially promotion as defined by Kotler (1972). This model was later expanded to the



7Ps of service marketing, adding people, physical evidence and process (Kotler & Keller, 2012). In promotional strategy, we distinguish broadly between push and pull factors.

Kotler (2012) also provided us with a model that analyses marketing communication and the purchasing behavior of shoppers in relation to banana flour, which assisted us with the development of our research hypothesis. We tried to communicate the physical properties of banana flour: colour, volume, spread ratio and texture, as well as appearance, aroma, flavour, overall acceptability and preference ranking compared with other flour.

In marketing communication, the source sends a message through various marketing channels as described above but the problem is that the receiver (the shopper) may receive the message differently. In the ideal case, we get positive feedback that is expressed in purchasing the product or negative feedback, expressed by not purchasing the product and possibly purchasing another product instead. In the case of banana flour, shoppers may purchase rice or cornstarch or wheat flour. This is a difficult case, as the price for banana flour is so much higher, which may outweigh the potential benefits (Bolten, 1989).

The trick is to integrate the various communication channels and bring social media to bear as well. This results in the kind of marketing communication strategy outlined by Holm (2006), which integrates marketing communication from tactics to strategy. Chen and Xie (2008) rediscovered word-of-mouth as a new element of the marketing communication mix. Kitchen (1996) explored the role of public relations in the promotional mix in a three-phase analysis. Duncan and Moriarty (1998) developed a communication-based marketing model for managing relationships with the now popular term 'relationship marketing'. Melewar and Saunders (2000) introduced a global corporate visual identity system as an extended marketing mix. Balmer, Harris and de Chernatony (2001) explored the importance of branding and corporate brand performance, while Palazon and Delgado (2009) looked at the moderating role of price consciousness on the effectiveness of price discounts and premium promotions. Moise, Georgescu and Zugra (2012) focused on marketing events. Constantinides (2006) revisited the marketing mix with a look towards twenty-first century marketing. Dominici (2009) went from marketing mix to e-marketing mix and provided a very good literature overview and classification of the field. In a more detailed examination, Anitsal, Girard and Anitsal (2012) explored an application of the services marketing mix framework, looking at how retailers communicate information on their sales receipts.

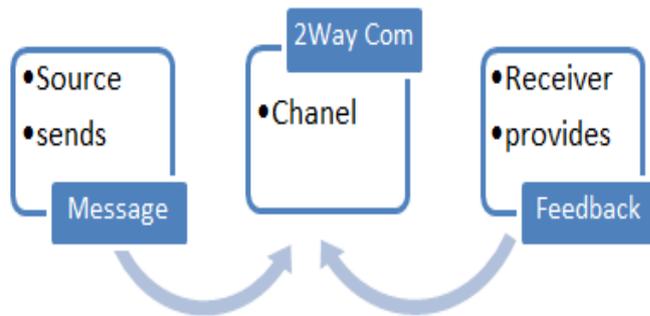


Figure 3. Marketing communication model

Research Methods

The study is qualitative in nature, as it tried to capture perception of and attitudes towards marketing communication influencing banana flour purchasing intention among shoppers in local supermarkets in Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat). However, the research instrument developed by the primary investigator (PI) is a quantitative measurement. A paper-based survey instrument was developed by the PI and pretested following ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies described by Decrop (2004). The shoppers were interviewed by the researchers and the results were captured with a paper-based instrument in the form of a questionnaire.

Population

This study is limited to supermarket shoppers in Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat). As other supermarkets in Bangkok and in Thailand in general are very similar, it is hoped that generalisations can be made from this study. The shoppers and their needs are very similar to those in Korat.

Sample

The study focused on supermarkets (Tesco, BigC, Makro, 7-Eleven, FamilyMart) in Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) and the survey was conducted on weekends with no great variance from visitors during the week. The majority of the visitors were female (55.3 per cent) and aged under 40 years with an undergraduate university education and below. The sample size is 400 participants, the sample was a random convenience sample and the sample demographics represent the demographics of the general shopper population.

Table 1: Demographic data

Variables	Count	Percentage
Sex		
1. Male	179	44.80
2. Female	221	55.30
Total	400	100
Age		
1. less than 20 years	52	13.00
2. 21–30 years	96	24.00
3. 31–40 years	108	27.00
4. 41–50 years	70	17.50
5. 51–60 years	70	17.50
6. More than 60 years	4	1.00
Total	400	100
Education		
1. Lower than Bachelor degree	154	38.50
2. Bachelor degree	216	54.00
3. Higher than Bachelor degree	30	7.50
Total	400	100

Table 2: Demographic data

Variables	Count	Percentage
Occupation		
1. Student	138	34.50
2. Retiree	26	6.50
3. Employee	120	30.00
4. Government	22	5.50
5. State enterprise employee	58	14.50
6. Entrepreneur	30	7.50
7. Others	6	1.50
Total	400	100
Income (Monthly)		
1. Less than 15,000 Baht	178	44.50
2. 15,001–25,000 Baht	86	21.50
3. 20,50–35,000 Baht	66	16.50
4. 35,00–45,000 Baht	20	5.00
5. 45,001–55,000 Baht	26	6.50
6. Higher than 55,000 Baht	24	6.00
Total	400	100

Sample continued

The majority of the participants in the study were employed and earned fewer than 35,000 Thai Baht per month. The vast majority came from Korat and the surrounding areas. There were no foreigners interviewed. All the participants were Thai nationals. The sample surveyed both first-time shoppers and frequent shoppers, who repeatedly purchased banana flour and were familiar with the product.



Figure 4. Typical Banana Flour Shopper Profile

Research Findings

The research findings can be grouped into the following broad categories: consumer perceptions toward marketing communication; consumer attitudes towards banana flour; and correlation between consumer attitude and marketing communication, as per the research hypothesis and research instrument. The data were summarised in the following tables and the findings were briefly explained in the research context. The results include both mean and standard deviation (SD) analysis as well as correlation coefficients between consumer attitude and marketing communication.

- **Consumer perception towards marketing communication**
 - Advertising perspective
 - Public relations perspective
 - Marketing activities perspective
 - Word-of-mouth perspective
 - Sales promotion perspective
 - Direct marketing media perspective

- **Consumer attitude towards banana flour**
 - Perception perspective
 - Emotion perspective
 - Behaviour perspective

- **Correlation between consumer attitude and marketing communication**
 - Advertising perspective
 - Public relations perspective
 - Marketing activities perspective
 - Word-of-mouth perspective
 - Sales promotion perspective
 - Direct marketing media perspective

Advertisement Perspective

The respondent with a mean of 3.95 and an SD of 0.96 agreed that social media (YouTube, Line and Facebook) shaped consumer perceptions to the largest degree. In second place were websites (mean 3.64, SD 0.97) followed by outdoor media which includes billboards as well as large LCD signs at the road site (mean 3.48, SD 0.91). Amazingly, in third place were television commercials (mean 3.37, SD 0.92) and in last place printed materials such as newspaper advertisement and flyers, with a mean of 3.33 and SD of 0.93. Overall, the study participants agreed that advertisement worked in terms of consumer perception and advertising perspective (mean 3.51, SD 0.82).

Table 3: Consumer perceptions – advertising perspective

Marketing communication	Mean	SD	Results
Advertising perspective			
1. Social media (YouTube, Line, Facebook)	3.95	0.96	Agreed
2. Websites	3.64	0.97	Agreed
3. Outdoor media	3.48	0.91	Agreed
4. Television	3.37	0.92	Agreed
5. Print media	3.33	0.93	Agreed
Average	3.51	0.82	Agreed

Public Relations Perspective

What we refer to as public relations in a broader sense included radio commercials (mean 3.35, SD 1.0), which proved to be very effective. This category was followed by billboard advertisements, mostly along the highway (mean 3.23, SD 1.03) and finally training

seminars that would promote consumer awareness in relation to banana flour and its health benefits for a healthier life. Overall, the participants agreed that public relations worked to improve consumer perceptions of banana starch.

Table 4: Consumer perceptions – public relations perspective

Marketing communication	Mean	SD	Results
Public relations perspective			
1. Local radio	3.35	1.00	Agreed
2. Billboard advertisement	3.23	1.03	Agreed
3. Training/seminar	3.15	1.05	Agreed
Average	3.24	1.02	Agreed

Marketing Activities Perspective

The various marketing events proved to be very effective in introducing a relative new product to the market. Product sales festivals, which are a uniquely Thai event where the marketing team goes on the road at special venues and sells the product at an introductory price were particularly useful (mean 3.69, SD 1.01). Health promotion events also appeared to be successful as they addressed the right target audience, which has a vested interest in improving health. These were fitness events at which free samples were handed out (mean 3.55, SD 0.94). Local contest activities were little lower in impact; these events included lucky draws as well as trivia quizzes, with the winners receiving free samples and product-related promotional gifts such as a banana pillow (mean 3.49, SD 0.99). Overall, the activities were successful, as everyone wants to get something for free (mean 3.57, SD 0.98); however, whether they actually lead to product purchases is questionable.

Table 5: Consumer perceptions – marketing activities perspective

Marketing communication	Mean	SD	Results
Marketing activities perspective			
1. Product sales festival	3.69	1.01	Agreed
2. Health activities	3.55	0.94	Agreed
3. Local contest activities	3.49	0.99	Agreed
Average	3.57	0.98	Agreed

Word-of-Mouth Perspective

Historically, word-of-mouth has been the best form of advertising. In this study, we distinguished two word-of-mouth sources. The first and most important source was friends and family who had used banana flour and were committed to it (mean 3.70, SD 0.89). This was by far the most effective way. The second word-of-mouth method was expert opinions of

health gurus and banana flour experts (mean 3.51, SD 0.97), which proved not as effective as friends and family, as these experts and celebrity endorsements may have had a vested interest in the product. Overall, word of mouth ranked highly as a way to influence consumer perceptions of banana flour (mean 3.60, SD 0.93).

Table 6: Consumer perceptions – word-of-mouth perspective

Marketing Communication	Mean	SD	Results
Word-of-mouth perspective			
1. Information from family or friends	3.70	0.89	Agreed
2. Information from banana flour experts	3.51	0.97	Agreed
Average	3.60	0.93	Agreed

Sales Promotion Perspective

We have already addressed some events that proved themselves effective with sales promotion. Discount deals such as buy one get one free and a 20 per cent introductory discount worked very well for the promotion of the product (mean 3.69, SD 0.90). Bonus free gifts, such as toy bananas and cooking moulds in a banana shape, were popular and desired gifts, and shoppers bought the product to get the gift (mean 3.49, SD 0.80). Contests and sweepstakes ranked high with the winners and lower with those who did not get the prizes (mean 3.48, SD 0.84). Overall, sales promotions were successful and proved that the price of the product may be the biggest handicap in terms of limited purchase.

Table 7: Consumer perceptions – sales promotion perspective

Marketing Communication	Mean	SD	Results
Sales Promotion Perspective			
1. Discount deals	3.69	0.90	Agreed
2. Bonus free gifts	3.49	0.80	Agreed
3. Contest and sweepstakes	3.48	0.84	Agreed
Average	3.55	0.84	Agreed

Direct Marketing Media Perspective

Direct marketing media included catalogues from which the product could be purchased, such as in the case of 7-Eleven stores, which also carry banana flour in their catalogues. This method enjoyed limited success (mean 3.43, SD 0.94); more effective were achieved by direct salespeople who sold the product at various venues, including in-store promotions and markets. Overall, direct marketing media proved effective, but with limitations (mean 3.51, SD 0.82).

Table 8: Consumer perceptions – direct marketing media perspective

Marketing communication	Mean	SD	Results
Direct marketing media perspective			
1. Catalogues	3.43	0.94	Agreed
2. Direct salesman	3.58	0.96	Agreed
Average	3.51	0.82	Agreed

Consumer Attitude towards Banana Flour

The consumer attitude towards banana flour will be measured in three parts. The consumers' perception of banana flour (Do they know what it is and how to use it?); the consumers' emotional perspective towards banana starch (consuming banana flour makes you feel good); and the shoppers' behaviour perspective, which mean they actually purchase the product despite the price.

Perception Perspective

In this part of our research, we tested consumers' perception of banana flour. Are the consumers even aware of banana flour (mean 3.33, SD1.14)? Do they know the difference between banana flour and other flours (mean 3.32, SD 1.05)? Do they consume banana flour (mean 3.31, SD 1.17)? Are they aware of the banana flour distribution channel and where to purchase banana starch (mean 3.25, SD 1.20)? Do they have information about banana flour (mean 3.22, SD 1.09)? Overall, the perception could have been better (mean 3.29, SD 0.99).

Table 9: Consumer attitude – perception perspective

Consumer attitude towards banana flour	Mean	SD	Results
Perception perspective			
1. Do you know banana flour?	3.33	1.14	Agreed
2. Do you think banana flour difference from others?	3.32	1.05	Agreed
3. Do you consume banana flour?	3.31	1.17	Agreed
4. Do you know banana flour distribution channel?	3.25	1.20	Agreed
5. Do you have the banana flour information?	3.22	1.09	Agreed
Average	3.29	0.99	Agreed

Emotional Perspective

On an emotional level, consumers felt that banana flour had many health benefits (mean 3.79, SD 0.85). Banana flour is easy to consume (mean 3.59, SD 0.89). It can also be used for many different dishes and applications (Mean 3.57 and SD 0.91). Banana flour influences eating behaviour (mean 3.51, SD 0.94) The consumer experienced banana flour consumption

from others (mean 3.44, SD 1.04). Overall, banana flour is a product that is affiliated with many emotional concerns (mean 3.58, SD 0.7).

Table 10: Consumer attitude – emotional perspective

Consumer attitude towards banana flour	Mean	SD	Results
Emotional perspective			
1. Banana flour has many health benefits	3.79	0.85	Agreed
2. Banana flour is easy to consume	3.59	0.89	Agreed
3. Banana flour has many uses	3.57	0.91	Agreed
4. Banana flour influences eating behaviour	3.51	0.94	
5. You learn about banana flour consumption from others	3.44	1.04	
Average	3.58	0.71	Agreed

Behavioural Perspective

The behavioural perspective tests whether consumers put their money where their mouth is. Will they spread the word and tell their friends about the benefits of banana flour (mean 3.69, SD 0.95)? Will they be willing to pay a premium price for banana flour (mean 3.49, SD 1.04)? Do they always consume banana flour instead of wheat and other flours (mean 3.39, SD 1.15)? Overall, customers who purchased banana flour believed in the product and were loyal to it (mean 3.52, SD 0.91).

Table 11: Consumer attitude – behavioral perspective

Consumer attitude towards banana flour	Mean	SD	Results
Behavioural perspective			
1. You will tell your friends about benefits of banana flour	3.69	0.95	Agreed
2. You appreciate to purchase banana flour even price is high	3.49	1.04	Agreed
3. You always eat banana flour	3.39	1.15	Agreed
Average	3.52	0.91	Agreed

Correlation Coefficient Analysis – Consumer Attitude and Marketing Communication

We also performed a correlation coefficient analysis, which looked at consumer attitude and marketing communication.

• **Correlation Between Consumer Attitude and Marketing Communication**

- Advertising perspective
- Public relations perspective
- Marketing activities perspective
- Word-of-mouth perspective
- Sales promotion perspective
- Direct marketing media perspective

Advertising Perspective

Social media (YouTube, Line and Facebook) had a correlation coefficient of 0.504, while websites scored 0.484 and outdoor media even lower, 0.253, followed by television advertisement (0.2) and printed media, which was even negative, – 0.047. The advertising perspective proved ineffective in promoting banana flour to a broad range of consumers.

Table 12: Correlation consumer attitude – advertising perspective

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Advertising perspective	
1. Social media (YouTube, Line, Facebook)	0.504**
2. Websites	0.484**
3. Outdoor media	0.253**
4. Television	0.200**
5. Print media	–0.047

** Significant at 0.01 level

Public Relations Perspective

Local radio advertising proved effective (0.512 correlation coefficient), but billboard advertising along the highway had a higher recall rate (0.529) and the most effective were the training seminars attended by future consumers (0.594) These seminars informed the consumers about the health benefits of the banana flour and made believers out of them more than any other public relations measure.

Table 13: Correlation consumer attitude – public relations perspective

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Public relations perspective	
1. Local radio	0.512**
2. Public relations billboard advertisement	0.529**
3. Training/seminar	0.594**

** Significant at 0.01 level

Marketing Activities Perspective

Marketing activities means special event marketing in various forms, such as general sales events (0.486 correlation coefficient). But health-related marketing activities scored higher (0.499), while local contestant events did not prove so successful (0.303).

Table 14: Correlation consumer attitude – marketing activities perspective

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Marketing activities perspective	
1. Product sales events	0.486**
2. Health activities	0.499**
3. Local contest activities	0.303**

** Significant at 0.01 level

Word-of-Mouth Perspective

Word-of-mouth proved the most effective way to promote a product like banana starch. Amazingly, the correlation coefficient for information received from friends and family was lower (0.425) than that of endorsements by celebrities and health experts, which was (0.542).

Table 15: Correlation consumer attitude – word-of-mouth perspective

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Word-of-mouth perspective	
1. Information from family or friends	0.425**
2. Information from banana flour experts	0.542**

** Significant at 0.01 level

Sales Promotion Perspective

Not surprisingly, discounts had a high correlation coefficient when it came to the relationship of consumer attitudes and purchasing interest (0.35), while bonus gift and freebies were less effective (0.239); however, contests and sweepstakes were appealing to consumers (0.337).

Table 16: Correlation consumer attitude – sales promotion

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Sales promotion perspective	
1. Price-off deals	0.35
2. Bonus free gifts	0.239**
3. Contest and sweepstakes	0.337**

** Significant at 0.01 level

Direct Marketing Perspective

Direct marketing had a strong correlation coefficient for catalogue sales such as health food catalogues, as they target specific market segments (0.459) while direct salespeople were less successful at promoting the product at markets and shopping events (0.363).

Table 17: Correlation consumer attitude – direct marketing

Marketing communication	Correlation coefficient
Direct marketing media perspective	
1. Catalogues	0.459**
2. Direct salesman	0.363**

** Significant at 0.01 level



Figure 5. Banana flour marketing communication mix

Conclusions

We can see that banana flour is a consumer product that offers many health benefits, but the average consumer is not aware of the benefits of the product. Activities such as sales seminars and health expert endorsements have proven effective and resulted in a loyal customer base that is willing to pay a premium price for the product. The customer is also the best form of advertisement in the form of word-of-mouth. In terms of advertising, social media such as Facebook and online proved to be effective with room to grow, as well as online advertising, which needs to have a push focus. Outdoor media in form of billboards along the freeway and big LCD screens in metropolitan areas also attracted the attention of commuters. Television and radio were less effective, mainly due to a limited advertising budget; the same applied to print media, which did not reach the right audience.

Marketing events were very popular with the consumers, who received promotional items for free; contests always created some losers so were less effective. Health-related festivals were the most successful, as they reached the proper target audience. Sales promotions such as introductory prices and buy one get one free pushed many customers to a buying decision to try the product, especially when aided by the salesperson (Promhitorn, 2019). The promotional gifts were very popular and, mixed with the right sales force, this was a winning marketing communication model.

A new model is catalogue sales, offered through 7-Eleven and online sales. These marketing channels reached the target audience and made the marketing communication model work, as the company had sent the right message – health benefits – to a receptive audience that listened and could easily understand how banana flour benefits their health without sacrificing taste in a broad variety of applications. These customers received and understood the marketing message and were willing to pay a premium price for a premium product.

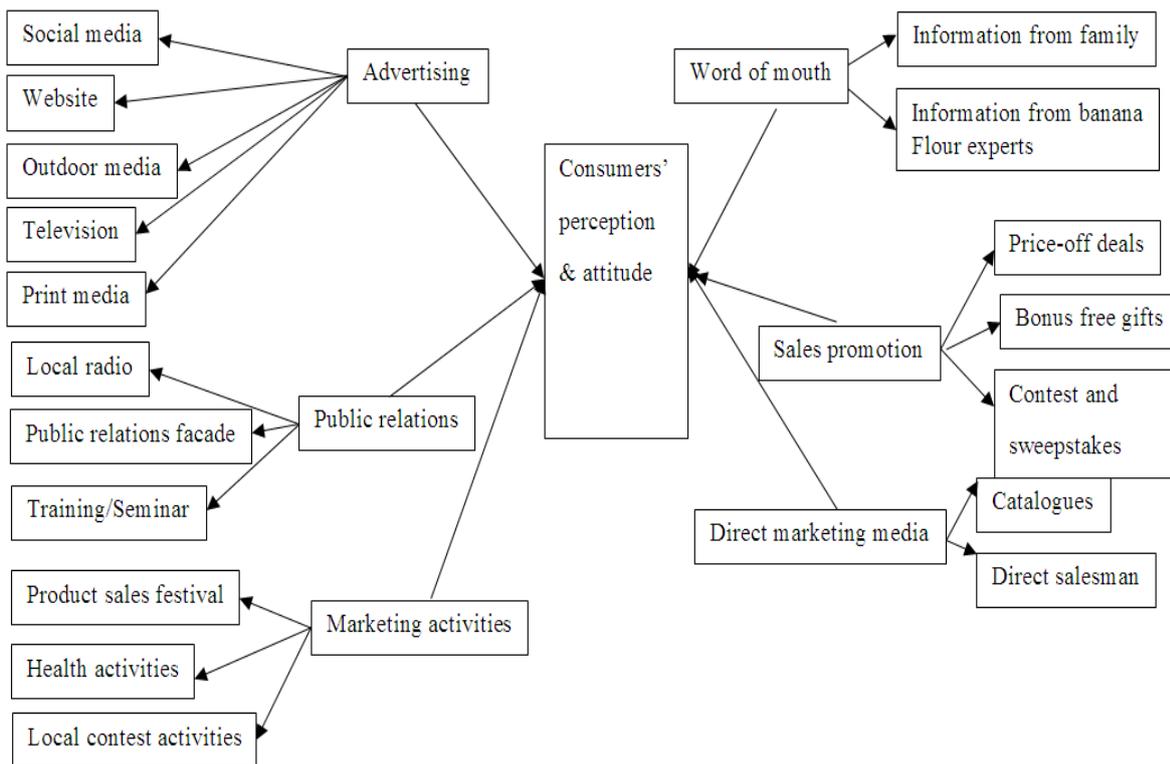


Figure 6. Conceptual Research Framework



Recommendations

It is recommended that this study be followed up over time, with a larger sample of more stores and customers in the original location. It would also be interesting to apply the same instrument to other locations in Thailand, including upscale shopping malls in Bangkok. Another recommendation is to replicate this study in neighboring Asian countries such as Cambodia, Laos Malaysia and Myanmar, as well as in the United States and Europe. We may also expand the scope of the study and focus on different aspects of banana flour, both in a business and product development context.



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