

When East meets West: Why consumers turn to alternative medicine

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Alternative health remedies are increasingly important in the health care marketplace. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* explores how consumers choose among the many available remedies.

"Examples of the wide array of health remedy options available to consumers include drugs, supplements, acupuncture, massage therapy, Ayurveda, and [Traditional Chinese Medicine](#) (to name a few). Such medical pluralism is common in both developed and developing countries and raises the questions: How do consumers choose among health remedies, and what are the consequences for a healthy lifestyle?" write authors Wenbo Wang (New York University), Hean Tat Keh (Beijing University), and Lisa E. Bolton (Pennsylvania State University).

The authors use "lay theories of medicine" to explain how consumers choose between Western medicine and its Eastern counterparts, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Ayurvedic medicine.

"Western Medicine is primarily concerned with the material aspect of the body and views all medical phenomena as cause-effect sequences, relying on rigorous scientific studies and research that seeks empirical proof to all phenomena," write the authors. "On the other hand, TCM and Ayurvedic Medicine favor a holistic approach, view the mind and body as a whole system, and rely upon inductive tools and methods for treatment."

Based on a series of experiments and surveys in the United States,

China, and India, the authors found that consumers prefer TCM (over Western medicine) when uncertain about the cause of an illness (i.e., diagnosis uncertainty)—because a holistic medicine tolerates uncertainty better than Western Medicine. Similarly, consumers prefer TCM (over Western medicine) because of lay beliefs that TCM offers an underlying cure (versus symptom alleviation by Western Medicine).

"These findings add to the growing debate over the regulation of health marketing and the delivery of health care, the role of direct-to-consumer advertising, and marketing efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle," the authors conclude.

More information: Wenbo Wang, Hean Tat Keh, and Lisa E. Bolton. "Lay Theories of Medicine and a [Healthy Lifestyle](#)." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): June 2010. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr).

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