Segmenting the elderly according to their risk of malnutrition: combining an attitudinal and a behavioural approach

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Abstract

• Objectives
From a public health perspective, this research proposes a segmentation of the elderly public with a view to the prevention of malnutrition. To this end, it proposes a combination of two typologies of older consumers in order to target them in accordance with their attitudes and behaviour in terms of food.

• Methodology
A qualitative exploratory study of 42 semi-structured interviews on changes in the food consumption and experiences of the elderly enabled us to: 1) translate the factors contributing to malnutrition in the elderly into operational variables and 2) identify profiles of elderly people according to their attitude to malnutrition factors (qualitative typology). The variables reflecting the factors of malnutrition were then measured in a questionnaire administered in France by telephone or face-to-face to a representative sample of 300 people aged 60 to 97 years old. A quantitative typological analysis was carried out to form homogeneous groups based on their eating habits and changes to their practices. Interpretation of the results was completed by comparisons between the groups (bilateral equality tests) of markers of the ageing process (health issues, social life events, relationship with time left to live).

• Results
We obtained three groups for each typology. The qualitative typology delineated “fussy”, “casual” and “optimistic” attitudes towards malnutrition factors. Based on dietary behaviour and changes therein, the quantitative typology shows that individuals can be characterised as: “stable”, “disengaged”, or “perturbed”. The groups are very similar in terms of average age. However, they differ in terms of attitude to the future and to markers of biological and social ageing.

• Managerial implications
The typologies are operational for practitioners wishing to target older consumers at risk of malnutrition. More specifically, actions are presented for each behavioural profile, taking into account the possible attitudinal profiles that may be associated with the behavioural profile in question.

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initiatives attempt to prevent numerous problems leading to dietary imbalances: loss of appetite and sensation of thirst, difficulty in chewing, and overconsumption of processed products rich in saturated fatty acids and salt. In all cases, the aim is to support changes in eating habits of the elderly, which can be extremely complex since it involves overturning habits ingrained since childhood (Van den Berg et al., 2009) or that have been conditioned by major life events. For example, illness or the death of a spouse can be associated with changes in eating behaviours, which may either be short or long term (Devine, 2005; Ford et al., 2019).

In addition to inherent resistance to change, social communication on nutritional recommendations suffers from lack of consideration of the diversity of older people’s profiles, since these groups are often identified and targeted according to age alone. As Guido et al. (2018) argue, however, it is important to take the heterogeneity of older people into account by going beyond the age criterion. In terms of health, Nguyen et al. (2021) also observe that the variety of situations increases with age. Thus, the aim of this research is to segment the elderly according to their risk of malnutrition.

Preventive actions have been introduced to redress this situation. In France, for example, the public authorities initiated the National Nutrition Health Programme (PNNS) to improve health through diet. Aimed at avoiding or limiting health concerns, these initiatives attempt to prevent numerous problems leading to dietary imbalances: loss of appetite and sensation of thirst, difficulty in chewing, and overconsumption of processed products rich in saturated fatty acids and salt. In all cases, the aim is to support changes in eating habits of the elderly, which can be extremely complex since it involves overturning habits ingrained since childhood (Van den Berg et al., 2009) or that have been conditioned by major life events. For example, illness or the death of a spouse can be associated with changes in eating behaviours, which may either be short or long term (Devine, 2005; Ford et al., 2019).

This preventive health message for the elderly illustrates the interest of public policies and non-profit organisations in limiting malnutrition in the elderly, which is a major and growing risk as we age (Clarke et al., 1998). Malnutrition refers to imbalances – deficiencies and excesses – in a person’s energy and/or nutritional intake (World Health Organization, 2021). With ageing, individuals tend to not only eat less (i.e. reduce the size of portions; Ford et al., 2019), but also to eat less healthily (poorer nutritional quality of food ingested; Ocean et al., 2019). This accelerates biological and psychological decline, leads to faster disease progression (Vesnaver et al., 2015), and ultimately exacerbates vulnerability in older populations (Ford et al., 2019).

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The research is part of a Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) approach that seeks to improve consumer practices. TCR is a research movement that examines social problems, such as vulnerability, injustice, poverty, malnutrition, and so on, by building bonds between consumers and other...