



Understanding economic and cultural drivers of alternative medicine adoption in the U.S

Adedapo Olanrewaju Oyenuga ^{1*}, Ngodoo Joy Sam-Bulya ², Rita Uchenna Attah ³

¹ Department of Agricultural Economics and Agricultural Business, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA

² Independent Researcher, Abuja, Nigeria

³ Independent Researcher, Bloomfield, NJ, USA

* Corresponding Author: Adedapo Olanrewaju Oyenuga

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-6641

Volume: 03

Issue: 01

January-February 2024

Received: 12-01-2024

Accepted: 15-02-2024

Page No: 19-24

Abstract

The adoption of alternative medicine in the United States has grown significantly, driven by a complex interplay of economic and cultural factors. This paper explores the economic drivers, including affordability, accessibility, and limitations within the conventional healthcare system, alongside cultural influences such as traditional beliefs, ethnic practices, and the rising popularity of wellness culture. Economic constraints often amplify the appeal of culturally familiar and cost-effective therapies, while regional and demographic variations reveal distinct adoption patterns. The findings highlight the need for policymakers to address financial barriers and for healthcare providers to embrace integrative care models. Recommendations include expanding insurance coverage, fostering public education on safe and effective therapies, and ensuring equitable access through targeted programs. Additionally, future research should focus on understanding the evolving dynamics of alternative medicine adoption and its integration into mainstream healthcare. This study aims to contribute to a more inclusive, informed, and patient-centered healthcare landscape by addressing these factors.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMOR.2024.3.1.19-24>

Keywords: Alternative medicine, economic drivers, cultural influences, healthcare accessibility, wellness culture, integrative care

1. Introduction

Alternative medicine, encompassing practices and treatments outside conventional Western medicine, has witnessed a remarkable rise in popularity in the United States over the past few decades (Taylor, 2022) ^[32]. These practices include acupuncture, herbal medicine, chiropractic care, homeopathy, and meditation. Individuals increasingly turn to these therapies for reasons ranging from dissatisfaction with conventional treatments to a desire for more holistic and personalized approaches to health (Kohl-Heckl, Schroeter, & Cramer, 2022) ^[27]. This shift reflects a broader movement toward wellness and preventive care, driven by changing societal attitudes and an evolving healthcare landscape (Tabish, 2024) ^[31].

The growing significance of alternative medicine in the U.S. can be attributed to several factors. On the one hand, economic considerations, such as the rising cost of conventional healthcare and limited insurance coverage, have prompted many individuals to explore less expensive and often perceived as more accessible alternatives (Taylor, 2022) ^[32]. On the other hand, cultural influences, including traditional beliefs, lifestyle trends, and a growing emphasis on natural and organic living, have also played a pivotal role (Tigan *et al.*, 2021) ^[33]. These economic and cultural drivers have contributed to a unique and dynamic healthcare environment where alternative medicine is becoming a mainstream choice for many Americans (Aware *et al.*, 2022) ^[21]. Studying the economic and cultural factors behind the adoption of alternative medicine is crucial for several reasons. First, it provides insight into healthcare consumers' changing priorities and behaviors (Abaku & Odimarha, 2024) ^[1]. Second,

understanding these drivers can help policymakers and healthcare providers address gaps in the current system, ensuring that individuals have access to safe and effective treatments. Finally, this exploration highlights the interplay between financial constraints and cultural preferences, shedding light on how these forces shape health-seeking behavior in diverse populations (Chew *et al.*, 2023) ^[23].

This paper examines the economic and cultural factors influencing the adoption of alternative medicine in the U.S., providing a nuanced understanding of its growing prevalence. By analyzing these drivers and their interactions, the research offers valuable insights into the motivations behind this trend and its broader implications for the healthcare system. The paper will also explore potential strategies for integrating alternative therapies with conventional medicine to enhance patient care and satisfaction. This lens aims to contribute to a more equitable and informed approach to healthcare in the U.S.

2. Economic Drivers of Alternative Medicine Adoption

Economic factors significantly influence the adoption of alternative medicine in the United States, as financial considerations often play a critical role in determining healthcare choices. From the cost of treatments to the availability of insurance coverage, these drivers shape the accessibility and appeal of alternative therapies for individuals seeking healthcare solutions.

2.1 Cost Comparison Between Conventional and Alternative Medicine

One of alternative medicine adoption's most significant economic drivers is the cost disparity between conventional and alternative medical treatments (Piras & Pedes, 2025) ^[30]. Conventional healthcare in the U.S. is notoriously expensive, with rising costs for hospital stays, surgeries, prescription medications, and diagnostic tests. These costs can be prohibitive for individuals without comprehensive insurance or those facing high deductibles (Alam, Rai, & Tiwari, 2025) ^[11]. In contrast, many forms of alternative medicine, such as yoga, meditation, or dietary supplements, are perceived as more affordable. Even therapies like chiropractic care or acupuncture, involving trained practitioners, often cost less per session than conventional treatments. This cost advantage particularly appeals to those seeking non-invasive or preventive approaches to healthcare. The growing availability of alternative options through community centers, wellness clinics, and online platforms has further contributed to their affordability compared to traditional care (Cherkin, Sherman, Deyo, & Shekelle, 2003) ^[22].

2.2 Accessibility and Affordability of Alternative Therapies

The accessibility of alternative medicine has also been a key driver of its adoption. Unlike conventional healthcare, which often requires navigating complex systems, scheduling appointments, and long wait times, alternative therapies are often more readily available. Many practitioners offer flexible hours, and some therapies, such as herbal remedies or meditation programs, can be accessed independently or online (Ajayi, Toromade, & Olagoke, 2024; Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu) ^[9].

Additionally, the affordability of alternative therapies makes them particularly appealing to individuals from lower-income backgrounds or those without sufficient insurance

coverage. For example, purchasing herbal supplements or attending a community yoga class is often less financially burdensome than paying for prescription medications or specialist consultations. This accessibility aligns with the growing demand for healthcare options that cater to diverse financial circumstances (Akindahunsi *et al.*, 2024) ^[10].

2.3 Insurance Coverage and Its Impact on Adoption

Insurance policies play a pivotal role in shaping healthcare choices, and their influence extends to the adoption of alternative medicine. While insurance plans often cover traditional healthcare treatments, many alternative therapies historically have not been. However, this landscape is changing. Some insurers now recognize the value of certain alternative therapies, such as chiropractic care, acupuncture, and massage therapy, which are increasingly included in health insurance plans (Fanijo, Hanson, Akindahunsi, Abijo, & Dawotola, 2023) ^[24].

Despite this progress, coverage remains limited and inconsistent, often requiring patients to pay out-of-pocket for a significant portion of alternative treatments. This financial burden can deter adoption, particularly for therapies requiring multiple sessions. Nevertheless, individuals who value these treatments often prioritize them, reallocating personal funds to access what they perceive as effective and beneficial care. As insurance companies gradually expand coverage for alternative therapies, adoption rates are likely to increase further (Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu) ^[16].

2.4 Socioeconomic Factors: Income Levels, Health Disparities, and Financial Barriers

Socioeconomic status is a critical determinant of access to and utilization of alternative medicine. Income levels influence healthcare decisions, with individuals in higher-income brackets more likely to afford both alternative and conventional options. Conversely, those in lower-income groups may rely on alternative therapies as a cost-effective solution to manage chronic conditions or prevent illnesses.

Health disparities also contribute to the appeal of alternative medicine. Marginalized communities, often facing barriers to conventional healthcare such as geographic inaccessibility, language differences, or systemic inequities, may turn to alternative therapies as an accessible alternative. For example, communities with limited access to healthcare facilities might rely on local practitioners or traditional culturally familiar and financially feasible remedies (Adefila, Ajayi, Toromade, & Sam-Bulya).

Financial barriers, including high out-of-pocket costs for conventional treatments, further drive individuals toward alternative options. Patients seeking affordable care for conditions like chronic pain, stress, or minor illnesses often find alternative therapies more manageable within their budgets. Moreover, alternative medicine's emphasis on preventive care aligns with the priorities of those aiming to reduce long-term healthcare costs (Ajayi, Toromade, & Olagoke).

3. Cultural Influences on Alternative Medicine Adoption

The cultural fabric of the United States plays a significant role in shaping health-seeking behaviors and influencing the adoption of alternative medicine. As a diverse nation, cultural attitudes, traditions, and values deeply affect how individuals perceive and engage with healthcare options beyond the conventional medical system. These cultural drivers promote

the acceptance of alternative therapies and create a fertile environment for their integration into mainstream wellness practices.

3.1 Role of Cultural Beliefs and Practices in Shaping Health-Seeking Behavior

Cultural beliefs and practices have long influenced health-seeking behavior by shaping individuals' attitudes toward illness, wellness, and healing. Many communities hold deep-rooted beliefs about the body's ability to heal itself and view health as a balance between physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Such perspectives align closely with the principles of alternative medicine, which often emphasizes holistic care and natural remedies. For instance, some cultures prioritize non-invasive methods, such as herbal medicine or meditation, as a first line of treatment for common ailments. Others believe in maintaining harmony between the body and its environment, a concept reflected in practices like Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine. These cultural frameworks make individuals more receptive to exploring therapies that align with their worldview and practices (Adefila, Ajayi, Toromade, & Sam-Bulya; Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu) ^[16].

Moreover, many Americans have adopted alternative therapies as part of broader cultural shifts toward wellness and mindfulness. This trend is particularly evident in urban and suburban areas, where people seek therapies like yoga or aromatherapy to combat stress and promote overall well-being (Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu, 2024a) ^[17].

3.2 Influence of Ethnicity, Religion, and Traditional Healing Systems

Ethnic and religious backgrounds significantly influence attitudes toward alternative medicine. Many immigrant communities bring with them traditional healing systems that remain central to their approach to healthcare. For example, Hispanic populations in the U.S. often incorporate remedies from folk medicine traditions, such as curanderismo, which utilizes herbs, spiritual practices, and massage. Similarly, Asian communities may rely on acupuncture, herbal treatments, and practices like tai chi, which are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage (Hanson & Sanusi, 2023) ^[24].

Religious beliefs also contribute to the adoption of alternative therapies. For some faith-based groups, healing practices are intertwined with spiritual principles that emphasize using natural resources or divine intervention. For instance, individuals in certain Christian Science or Native American communities might favor prayer and traditional remedies over pharmaceutical solutions.

These ethnic and religious influences highlight the diversity of approaches to healthcare in the U.S., where alternative medicine often bridges cultural identity and modern health practices. By providing culturally congruent care, alternative medicine practitioners help foster trust and accessibility within these communities (Adefila, Ajayi, Toromade, & Sam-Bulya; Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu, 2024b) ^[18].

3.3 Trends in Wellness Culture, Including Holistic and Preventive Health Approaches

The rise of wellness culture in the U.S. has driven the mainstream adoption of alternative medicine. Wellness culture, characterized by an emphasis on self-care, prevention, and holistic health, has gained traction among

individuals seeking to improve their quality of life beyond addressing acute illnesses. Central to this movement is the idea that health is a continuous process requiring active participation in physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and plant-based diets have become cultural phenomena, often tied to the broader adoption of alternative therapies. These practices are marketed as lifestyle choices rather than treatments, appealing to a demographic prioritizing sustainability, natural living, and preventive care.

Social media and celebrity endorsements have further amplified the visibility of wellness culture, normalizing alternative therapies as an integral part of self-improvement routines. This cultural shift has also contributed to the perception of alternative medicine as a complement rather than an alternative to conventional care, encouraging wider acceptance across diverse populations (Apata, Falana, Hanson, Oderhohwo, & Oyewole, 2023; Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu, 2024c) ^[24, 19].

3.4 Public Perception and Trust in Alternative Medicine Practitioners

Public perception and trust in alternative medicine practitioners are crucial in their adoption. Many individuals are drawn to practitioners who take a more personalized, empathetic, and patient-centered approach compared to conventional healthcare providers. The emphasis on listening to patients' concerns, offering individualized treatment plans, and promoting natural healing fosters trust and satisfaction among those who seek alternative care.

However, trust in alternative medicine is not universal. Skepticism persists, particularly regarding the efficacy and scientific validation of certain therapies. This divide often reflects cultural differences, with some communities more inclined to trust traditional methods while others demand evidence-based practices. Efforts to bridge this gap have included integrating alternative therapies into academic and clinical settings, which enhances their credibility. Research demonstrating the efficacy of certain practices, such as mindfulness for stress reduction or acupuncture for chronic pain, has bolstered public confidence (Anjorin, Ijomah, Toromade, & Akinsulire, 2024; Toromade & Chiekezie, 2024) ^[12, 16].

4. Interplay Between Economic and Cultural Factors

The adoption of alternative medicine in the United States is not driven solely by economic or cultural factors but by the intricate interplay between the two. Economic constraints often magnify the influence of cultural preferences, while regional and demographic variations reveal how these forces converge in shaping health-seeking behaviors. Understanding this dynamic provides a more holistic view of why alternative medicine has gained traction across diverse populations (Olufemi-Phillips, Ofodile, Toromade, Eyo-Udo, & Adewale).

Economic constraints frequently reinforce cultural preferences for alternative medicine by limiting access to conventional healthcare options. High healthcare costs, inadequate insurance coverage, and financial disparities compel individuals to seek alternatives that are both culturally familiar and financially accessible. For example, immigrant communities with traditional healing practices often turn to remedies and therapies rooted in their cultural heritage because they are more affordable than conventional

treatments. These practices may include herbal medicines, spiritual healing, or dietary changes, which align with their cultural values and economic realities.

Additionally, populations facing financial strain often prioritize preventive and holistic approaches that align with their cultural beliefs. For instance, yoga and meditation, which have origins in South Asian traditions, are cost-effective and resonate with broader wellness movements. Economic limitations encourage individuals to adopt these practices, as they require minimal resources while promoting long-term health benefits (Adefila, Ajayi, Toromade, & Sam-Bulya, 2024; Attah, Garba, Gil-Ozoudeh, & Iwuanyanwu, 2024d) ^[9, 20].

Economic constraints also amplify the use of community-based healthcare models within cultural groups. Many ethnic communities rely on informal networks of traditional healers or community health practitioners, who offer affordable services that are culturally sensitive and easily accessible. This blending of economic necessity and cultural familiarity sustains the popularity of alternative medicine within these groups (Ajayi, Toromade, & Olagoke). The adoption of alternative medicine varies significantly across regions and demographic groups in the U.S., reflecting the interplay of economic and cultural factors. Urban areas, for example, tend to have higher adoption rates due to the availability of diverse alternative medicine providers and the prevalence of wellness-focused lifestyles. Cities like Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco are hubs for practices such as acupuncture, naturopathy, and yoga, often driven by affluent populations seeking holistic and preventive care (Igwe, Eyo-Udo, Toromade, & Tosin, 2024) ^[26].

In contrast, rural areas may exhibit different patterns influenced by economic limitations and cultural traditions. Limited access to conventional healthcare services can make alternative medicine attractive in these regions. For instance, communities in the Appalachian region often rely on herbal remedies and traditional healing practices passed down through generations. These practices serve as both a cultural tradition and a practical solution to geographic and economic barriers.

Demographic factors, such as age and ethnicity, also play a role. Younger populations, particularly millennials and Gen Z, are more likely to adopt alternative therapies as part of a wellness-oriented lifestyle. These groups often view alternative medicine as a proactive approach to health, integrating practices like mindfulness and dietary supplements into their daily routines. Meanwhile, ethnic minorities, including Hispanic, Asian, and African American communities, are more likely to draw upon culturally specific alternative therapies, influenced by both tradition and economic considerations (Adefila, Ajayi, Toromade, & Sam-Bulya; Olufemi-Phillips, Ofodile, Toromade, Igwe, & Adewale) ^[9].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research highlights that economic drivers primarily center on affordability, accessibility, and the limitations of conventional healthcare systems. Individuals with limited financial resources often gravitate toward alternative therapies due to their lower cost and accessibility. In parallel, cultural drivers emphasize the alignment of alternative medicine with traditional practices and holistic approaches that resonate with people's values and beliefs. The interplay of these factors is evident in various demographic and

regional patterns, where financial constraints amplify the appeal of culturally familiar practices. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the growing popularity of wellness culture has mainstreamed alternative medicine, particularly among younger generations and urban populations. Meditation, yoga, and dietary supplements are increasingly viewed as preventive healthcare measures, reflecting a shift in societal priorities toward holistic well-being. These findings underscore the complex motivations behind adopting alternative medicine, making it essential to consider economic and cultural factors in developing healthcare strategies.

The growing reliance on alternative medicine presents significant implications for policymakers, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders. For policymakers, it highlights the need to address economic barriers that drive individuals away from conventional healthcare. Expanding insurance coverage to include evidence-based alternative therapies can reduce out-of-pocket costs and improve equitable access. Additionally, investing in public health education campaigns can help inform individuals about the safe and effective use of alternative medicine, reducing the risk of misinformation and unregulated practices.

Healthcare providers must also adapt to this shift by embracing integrative care models that combine conventional and alternative treatments. This approach meets patients' preferences and ensures that alternative therapies are used safely and effectively. Collaboration between conventional medical practitioners and alternative medicine providers can create a more holistic, patient-centered healthcare system. For stakeholders such as educators and researchers, there is an opportunity to contribute to the evidence base for alternative medicine. Supporting rigorous studies on the efficacy, safety, and cost-effectiveness of various therapies can enhance their legitimacy and guide informed decision-making by consumers and providers.

To foster informed choices, it is crucial to prioritize education and awareness. Governments and healthcare organizations should develop resources that clearly outline alternative therapies' benefits, risks, and scientific evidence. These efforts can empower individuals to make informed decisions about their health and reduce reliance on unverified treatments.

Equitable access to alternative medicine can be improved through targeted policy interventions. Expanding community-based programs that provide affordable wellness services, such as yoga classes or herbal clinics, can ensure that underserved populations benefit from alternative therapies. Subsidies or financial assistance programs for evidence-based therapies can also reduce economic disparities, making these options accessible to those in need. Another recommendation involves enhancing regulatory oversight to ensure the safety and quality of alternative medicine products and services. Establishing clear guidelines and certification processes for practitioners can increase public trust while protecting consumers from fraudulent or harmful practices.

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