



## Research report

## Major influences on buying decision processes by international university students. Differences by continent of origin

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## ABSTRACT

To analyze how food values and other variables related to dietary acculturation affect international university students' food buying decisions, this article provides an in-depth review of relevant literature related to the food buying decisions of groups of sojourners, which suggest several research hypotheses. The data collection targeted international university students in Spain and used factorial analysis of the main components together with linear parametric regressions. The resulting findings offer distinct insights, according to sojourners' continent of origin. Specifically, whereas European students exhibit a higher propensity to value sustainable production practices in the food choices, American students emphasize flavor and exhibit a greater degree of adaptation. These findings in turn suggest some key managerial recommendations and research guidelines for both private and public operators in related fields.

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## Introduction

The processes human beings employ to feed themselves are complex and multidisciplinary, featuring both social and symbolical aspects, among others (Sobal, Bisogni, Devine, & Jastran, 2006). Eating is a means of communication that humans use to express and maintain their lifestyles, often linked to their individual cultures (Atkins & Bowler, 2001; Logue, 1991). We can thus refer to a food identity that people express and that includes, among other elements, the way they eat or develop processes that enable them to choose the food they eat (Nevo & Bernat, 2010).

The heterogeneity that marks food consumption is strongly evidenced by the simultaneous coexistence of various alimentary styles, originating with where and when people acquire their eating habits (e.g., family), their preferences (e.g., culinary habits, lifestyles, and ways of thinking), their values, and practical constraints (Lusk & Briggeman, 2009). From a nutritional point of view, the food choices that people make are critical, because they determine which nutrients enter the body and strongly affect health status (Kissileff & Van Itallie, 1982). Food choices also establish eating habits over time (Johansen, Rasmussen, & Madsen, 2006). The way that consumers consider and select among available foods influences their purchase, preparation, and consumption in a range of contexts, including grocery stores, restaurants, vending

machines, parties, social events, or meals at home (Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Sobal, Khan, & Bisogni, 1998).

Food decision processes incorporate not only decisions based on conscious reflection but also automatic, habitual, and subconscious choices (Furst et al., 1996). Some seminal works in this field (e.g., Lewin, 1943, 1951) suggest specific frames of reference involved in food choice, such as social status, cost, taste, or health. Subsequent contributions also incorporate values related to cognitive and/or motivational factors. For example, target analyses that involve new cultures often prioritize cultural aspects associated with both sociological and psychological adjustment. Research into the food choices of immigrants thus has gained substantial academic and professional interest (e.g., Peñaloza, 2001; Tambyah & Chng, 2006).

Some studies explore how immigrants adapt to new cultures through food consumption, in circumstances characterized by multiculturalism or globalization (Oswald, 1999; Penaloza & Gilly, 1991). In these settings, beyond food-related values such as taste, tradition, origin, or appearance, variables pertaining to cultural and psychological adaptation also exert significant influences on buying and consumption processes (Jamal, 1998; Laroche, Kim, & Tomiuk, 1999; Verbeke & Lopez, 2005). Thus in parallel with acculturation—defined as the process by which a group adopts the cultural patterns of a host group (Berry, 1980)—we can consider dietary acculturation, or the process that occurs when members in a migrating group adopt the eating patterns and food choices of their new environment (Satia, 2003; Satia et al., 2001).

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In this regard, more recent research focuses on the food buying behaviors of immigrants who engage only in the short term with a new culture, or sojourners (Pitts, 2009; Tambyah & Chng, 2006; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), such as international university students (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010). These studies acknowledge the notable mobility of sojourners across countries in the modern global era, which has resulted in dramatic increases in the number of students who study abroad (Pitts, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Tafarodi & Smith, 2001). This particular group is among the most highly interactive cohorts in history, representing perhaps the largest and first group of people to communicate freely with others from all over the world (Pérez-Cueto & Verbeke, 2009; Wang, 2003). Furthermore, they have great economic importance for the universities that receive them (Brown et al., 2010; Cushner & Karim, 2004; Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2011). Thus more studies are needed to assess the specific choice patterns and behaviors of this relevant group.

In this stream, we analyze how the food values (Lusk & Briggeman, 2009; see also Lusk, 2011) and other variables related to dietary acculturation influence the food buying decision processes of international university students. Previous studies offer evidence of some interesting differences in terms of acculturation (e.g., Brown et al., 2010), due to the consumption of food products and according to certain demographic variables, such as continents of origin. We analyze the influence of such variables for different segments of students who represent different continents of origin. We begin by presenting our conceptual framework, which we derived from an in-depth review of relevant literature related to food buying decisions by sojourners. In turn, we assess data collected from a sample of international university students in Spain, using factorial analysis of the main components and linear parametric regression. The presentation of the main research findings is segmented by sojourners' continent of origin. Finally, from these findings, we propose some managerial recommendations and research guidelines.

## Conceptual framework

The different studies of immigrants' consumption vary in the specific products they analyze, though a focus on food products is unsurprisingly common (e.g., Chavez, Sha, Persky, Langener, & Pestano-Binghay, 1994; Hroboticky & Krondl, 1984; Langreo Navarro, 2005; Sobal, 1998): When people migrate to other countries, they carry their eating habits with them. In this research stream, some studies have analyzed food consumption by considering the impact of food values, cultural differences, and acculturation processes (e.g., Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1988; Furnham & Bochner, 1988; Jamal, 1998; Laroche et al., 1999; Peñaloza, 1989; Peñaloza, 1994, 2001; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999; Pitts, 2009; Verbeke & Lopez, 2005). Therefore, the following literature review addresses the influence of food values (Food values) and dietary acculturation (Dietary acculturation) on the food buying decisions of a particular group of sojourners, namely, international university students. With this foundation, we also propose research hypotheses.

### Food values

By exploring how British-Pakistanis perceive both their own food and English food while living in the United Kingdom, Jamal (1998) highlights generational differences: the first generation of immigrants perceived their own food as traditional and tasty but oily and problematic, while English foods seemed foreign, bland, and healthy. Then younger generations increasingly came to consume mainstream English foods while still consuming traditional Pakistani food. Verbeke and Lopez (2005), examining ethnic food

attitudes and behavior among Belgians and Hispanics living in Belgium, observed that (a) taste and appearance were key attributes determining Belgians' preference for ethnic foods, (b) Hispanics considered their native food better tasting, and (c) the main barriers to maintaining their Latin American food habits were availability and time. Thus, certain food aspects, such as tradition, taste, or appearance, offer key predictors of food consumption by diverse immigrants. These values appear in the food values scale proposed by Lusk and Briggeman (2009) and validated by Lusk (2011).

Such research also notes the importance of accounting for sojourner collectives. A particularly interesting group consists of university students registered in international exchange programs (Mansoor & Quillin, 2007; Pérez-Cueto & Verbeke, 2009), who exhibit specific patterns of adaptation to their host culture. These consumers have a strong capacity to adapt to the host culture, as manifested in their food consumption habits (Navara & James, 2002).

Starting university studies usually marks an important transition in a person's life, which might include living away from the family home for the first time and taking on new responsibilities, such as food choices (Colic Baric, Satalic, & Lukesic, 2003). These young adults tend to lack experience with buying and preparing foods or planning meals (Bull, 1988), so university students' unfavorable dietary habits seem nearly universal across countries (Anding, Suminiski, & Boss, 2001; Huang, Qiu, Bai, & Pray, 2003; Mammias, Bertias, Linardakis, Moschandreas, & Kafatos, 2004; Ortega et al., 1997; Racette, Deusinger, Strube, Highstein, & Deusinger, 2005; Soriano, Molto, & Manes, 2000; Steptoe et al., 2002). Pan, Dixon, Himborg, and Huffman (1999) observe significant increases in the consumption of fats, salty and sweet snacks, and dairy products by Asian students in the United States. Other studies instead suggest more positive outcomes though; Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2006) investigate the health and well-being of international students (mostly from Asian countries) at the University of Melbourne and find positive attitudes among the students about their perceptions of the nutritional balance in their diet.

Thus, certain food values in the established scale, such as taste, convenience, or nutrition (Lusk, 2011; Lusk & Briggeman, 2009), likely exert a powerful influence on the food buying decision processes exhibited by international university students. We propose a significant expected influence of food values on the food buying decision process undertaken by international university students. This process also features different stages, and most marketing academic research and strategic planning studies concentrate on the final stages, as validated by Mittal (1995): evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase stages. In line with these findings, we specify a three-part hypothesis:

**H1.** Food values significantly influence the (a) evaluation of alternatives, (b) choice, and (c) postpurchase stages of the food buying decision process undertaken by international university students.

### Dietary acculturation

The degree of cross-cultural adjustment is a multidimensional concept, not a unitary phenomenon (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1962; Oberg, 1960). Therefore, it is important to highlight the diversity of socio- and psycho-cultural variables addressed in prior cross-cultural literature (Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Berry, 2003). In particular, despite their conceptual links, psycho- and socio-cultural adjustment constitute distinct processes (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1993; Ward & Searle, 1991). Whereas socio-cultural adjustment

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