

Bon Appétit: An Investigation of the Motivations Underlying Texas College Students' Food Choices

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Food choices and nutrition directly impact the success of college students as they experience newfound independence (Abraham et al., 2018). Individuals' unconscious food choices are motivated by personal qualities, cultural norms, and social environments and have the potential to be changed based on modified education, communications, and marketing techniques. Previous research has found that communications and marketing within the agricultural industry can influence nutritional decision-making (Gillespie & Bold, 2017; Jaquier et al., 2012). Investigating factors that influence college students' food choices is essential for discovering communication needs for the next generation of consumers (Abraham et al., 2018). We used the theory of planned behavior as a theoretical guide to complete the study, which posits that personal attitudes, traits, values, social norms, and environmental conditions can predict an individual's intended behavior (Ajzen 1991; Shepherd et al., 1995). Azjens' (1991) theory of planned behavior features three main components: attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, which serve as the foundation of individuals' behavioral intentions or decision making. In the existing body of literature about food choice motivation (FCM), the theory of planned behavior is commonly used to predict food choices (Nardi et al., 2019). As a result, attitudes have been identified as the strongest predictor of consumers' food consumption decisions (Ajzen, 2015).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of our study was to identify Texas college students' primary FCMs and factors that influence *health* as a FCM. We answered two research questions: 1) What are Texas college students' top three FCMs?; and 2) What effect do mood, sensory appeal, natural content, weight control, and ethical concern have on Texas college students' health-related FCMs when controlling for classification, gender, and preference to eat meals cooked at home or purchased at a restaurant?

Methods

Our study implemented a survey research design and was conducted as part of an undergraduate communications research methods course. Students in the course helped develop the survey instrument, which included Steptoe et al.'s (1995) Food Choice Questionnaire. The 36-item questionnaire, which has confirmed psychometric properties and measures the influence of health, mood, convenience, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern on food choice. Responses were collected using a 4-point Likert-type scale (4 = *very important* to 1 = *not important at all*). Students in the course collected data via their social media accounts by posting the survey link to Facebook and Twitter twice in one week and received 124 usable responses from Texas college students, who served as the population of interest. After the semester concluded, we conducted a descriptive analysis and computed Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients to determine the relationships between health and the other eight motives included in the questionnaire. We also conducted a multiple regression analysis that focused on *health* (the motive) as the outcome variable. The regression model included classification, gender, mood, sensory appeal, natural content, weight control, ethical concern, and preference to eat meals cooked at home or purchased at a restaurant.

Results

Students' food choices were primarily motivated by price ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .59$), sensory appeal ($M = 2.94$, $SD = .56$), and health ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .63$). We found a statistically significant low correlation between health and sensory appeal ($r = .18$, $p = .047$), statistically significant moderate correlations between health and mood ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) and health and ethical concern ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), and statistically significant substantial correlations between health and natural content ($r = .57$, $p < .001$) and health and weight control ($r = .56$, $p < .001$; Davis, 1971). Therefore, the more students' food choices were motivated by natural content, weight control, mood, ethical concern, and sensory appeal, the more they were motivated by health. The regression model accounted for 59.28% of the variance in students' health-related FCMs. Accounting for the number of predictors, the adjusted percentage of variance explained is 54.67%. The F-test shows that the model explained a statistically significant amount of variation in the outcome ($F(12, 106) = 12.86$, $p < .001$). Each additional point in mood as a FCM is associated with a statistically significant average increase in health as a FCM of .25, ($t(106) = 3.46$, $p = .001$). In addition, each additional point in natural content as a FCM is associated with a statistically significant average increase in health as a FCM of .32, ($t(106) = 5.70$, $p < .001$), and each additional point in weight control as a FCM is associated with a statistically significant average increase in health as a FCM of .34, ($t(106) = 5.76$, $p < .001$). Finally, the mean of health as a FCM for students who prefer to eat meals they purchase from a restaurant is .40 lower compared to students who prefer to eat meals they cook at home, which is statistically significant ($t(106) = -2.88$, $p = .005$).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Through this study, we sought to understand Texas college students' FCMs. Price, sensory appeal, and health were their top three FCMs. Additionally, we found that health is statistically significantly correlated with natural content, weight control, mood, ethical concern, and sensory appeal. We also found that mood, natural content, and weight control were statistically significant predictors of students' health-related FCMs. Health, as a FCM, was statistically significantly lower for students who preferred to eat meals purchased from a restaurant compared to students who preferred to eat meals cooked at home. Results of our study add to previous literature regarding how personal beliefs and attitudes impact food choice behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Shepherd et al., 1995). When marketing to college students, we recommend using price, sensory appeal, and health as key selling points for food products. Additionally, health could be a salient motivator when advertising or marketing foods or ingredients used for cooking at home. We suggest future research to determine if differences exist between college students' FCMs by region and to identify relationships between college students' FCMs and their demographic (e.g., socio-economic, gender, ethnicity) and psychographic (e.g., lifestyles, habits, interests) characteristics. This would allow for development of audience-specific communications and marketing materials.

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