

Discovering Food Choice Motivations of Texas College Students

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

As college students undergo new experiences and embrace their independence, nutrition and food choices can impact their health and academic success (Abraham et al., 2018). The college lifestyle provides experiences that uniquely impact their food choices, including living independently and choosing how and where to access food (i.e., meal plans, dining halls, grocery stores; Vilaro et al., 2017). Several factors could motivate these choices, including cultural norms, social environments, and individual qualities. The theoretical guide for our study was the theory of planned behavior, which states that traits, values, environmental conditions, and personal attitudes can predict an individual's behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Shepard et al., 1995). Ajzen's (1991) theory is comprised of three components: attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control, and has been commonly used to predict food choices (e.g., Nardi et al., 2019). In regard to food choice motivations, the strongest predictor of decisions about food consumption is attitude (Ajzen, 2015).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of our study was to identify Texas college students' primary food choice motivations and determine the relationships between their motivations. We answered two research questions: 1) How do Texas college students perceive the importance of food choice motivators?; and 2) What are the relationships between food choice motivations of Texas college students?

Methods

We conducted our study during two semesters of an undergraduate research methods course in communication and implemented a survey research design. The survey instrument included Steptoe et al.'s (1995) Food Choice Questionnaire. The questionnaire assessed the influence of health, mood, convenience, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern on food choice. Using a 4-point Likert-type scale (4 = very important to 1 = not important at all), students enrolled in the course collected data using their social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter). They posted the survey link on their accounts twice in one week and received 317 useable responses from college students in Texas. We conducted a descriptive analysis and calculated correlations between food choice motivations.

Results

Texas college students' food choices were primarily motivated by price ($M = 3.28$, $SD = .65$), convenience ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .59$) and sensory appeal ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .60$).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Texas Students' Food Choice Motivations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Price	3.28	.65

Convenience	3.11	.59
Sensory Appeal	3.03	.60
Health	2.79	.67
Mood	2.73	.69
Weight	2.42	.78
Familiarity	2.41	.75
Natural Content	2.06	.78
Ethical Concern	1.74	.74

We found the strongest, statistically significant correlations between natural content and health ($r = .62$), weight and health ($r = .53$), price and convenience ($r = .51$), and mood and sensory appeal ($r = .51$).

Table 2

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients Representing the Relationships Between Texas Students' Food Choice Motivations

	Price	Conv.	Sensory	Health	Mood	Weight	Familiar	Natural	Ethics
Price	1								
Conv.	.51*	1							
Sensory	.22*	.28*	1						
Health	.04	.08	.15*	1					
Mood	.22*	.39*	.51*	.33*	1				
Weight	.15*	.18*	.16*	.53*	.29*	1			
Familiar	.28*	.48*	.47*	.04	.41*	.08	1		
Natural	-.10	.01	.08	.62*	.22*	.35*	-.04	1	
Ethical	.05	.15*	.31*	.36*	.28*	.25*	.22*	.41*	1

Note. $p < .001$

Conclusions and Recommendations

The top three food choice motivations of Texas college students were price, convenience, and sensory appeal with the strongest correlations between natural content and health, weight and health, price and convenience, and mood and sensory appeal. The results of this study add to previous literature regarding the connection between food choice behaviors and attitudes and personal beliefs (Ajzen, 1991; Shepherd et al., 1995). Price, convenience, and sensory appeal are important for food product marketing to Texas college students. Because connections between natural and health, weight and health, price and convenience, and mood and sensory are important, food marketing companies could consider these motivators when marketing to the new consumer. Additionally, these motivations could be used in extension and nutrition education programming. Further research is needed to determine relationships between demographic, geographic, and psychographic characteristics, and college students' food choice motivations. Such research would help in the development of audience-specific marketing and communication efforts.

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