

Post-Migration Food Habits and its Implications on Marketing: The Case of Sri Lankans Living in NSW, Australia

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Australian population growth is primarily driven by migrants and in 2009-10 nearly 57% of the population growth was attributable to migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011a). As a result, nearly half of the population now claims themselves as either born overseas or as a child of a migrant (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011). United Kingdom and New Zealand have been the two top most countries that contribute significantly to the migrant population. However, the number of additions from these two countries has declined by 20% and 29% respectively during the period 2008-09 to 2009–10. Contrary to this, migrant population from Asian countries have increased sustaining the population increase. Among them migrants from Sri Lanka is the third largest contributor representing an increase of 10.3% during this period (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011).

When people migrate from one country to another they undergo a cultural and psychological change known as acculturation. According to Berry (2005), process of acculturation takes a long time which could result in cultural changes both in dominant as well as non-dominant groups. In this process of change, people tend to maintain some pre-migration patterns of food consumption as it is one of the key modes of expression of ethnic identity and culture (Ogden, Ogden and Schau 2004; Jamal and Chapman 2000; Laroche Kim and Tomiuk 1998; Peñaloza 1994; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). It has also been shown that food habits of migrants are highly resistant to change (Cleveland *et al.* 2009). This generates an ethnic market segment within the country of settlement (Goldfranck, 2005) and such could open up a number of opportunities for producers and marketers in the host country. Similarly this would also generate a market opportunity for exporters of the country of origin of the migrants. Thus, this study was conducted to analyze the post-migration food habits of Sri Lankans living in New South Wales (NSW), Australia and to identify its possible implications on food marketing.

Procedures

This study was carried out in NSW, Australia which has the second largest Sri Lankan migrant community amounting 34% of the total Sri Lankan migrants to Australia (based on the settlement data during 1991-2011, Department of Immigration and Citizenship). Due to unavailability of official residential list of migrants in Australia, the snowball sampling method was used in this study. Initially, Sri Lankan migrants settled in NSW were contacted through networks of friends and priests of religious places. Then, each person was requested to introduce another set of potential respondents. These contacts included a total of 200 people from major ethnic groups – Sinhalese and Tamils. Survey was carried out in August-September, 2011. Of the 200 individuals contacted, only 115 duly completed or returned the questionnaire yielding a response rate of 58%. These 115 questionnaires were completed through face to face interviews ($n = 33$), telephone interviews ($n = 7$) and via e-mail ($n = 75$).

Questions under three broad categories – frequency and types of food consumed, cultural identity and acculturation, and socio-economic factors – were included in questionnaire. Frequency of ethnic food consumption was measured as one meal a day, several meals a day or other and three mostly consumed food items were studied. Level of acculturation was measured by using 12 items – preference for ethnic food consumption (4 items), social interaction (3 items) and language use and media usage (5 items). These items were selected based on the previous studies on acculturation (Ariyawardana, Govindasamy and Puduri 2010 and 2009; Cleveland *et al.* 2009; Verbeke and López 2005; Laroche, Kim and Tomiuk 1998; Peñaloza 1994). The questionnaire was pre-tested and modified accordingly prior to administrations. All the items were measured by using a 5-point scale that ranged from 1- strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree. These 12 items were subjected to cluster analysis and respondents with similar ethnic identity and acculturation patterns were identified. Further analysis was done based on the mean values. Questions on gender, ethnicity, age, age at migration, period of stay, education, occupation and household income were included to measure their demographic and socio-economic status. Kruskal-Wallis and one-way ANOVA techniques were used to compare mean ranks and mean values.

Results

The 115 respondents who duly completed the survey comprised of 76% Sinhalese and 24% Tamils (according to the database of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, the last island-wide census on ethnic composition in Sri Lanka has recorded 74% Sinhalese and 13% Tamils in 1981). Over 80% of the respondents were between 31-55 years of age. More than

86% of the respondents either had a bachelor's or a postgraduate degree and over 76% were employed as professionals. Results indicated that 60% of the respondents had a household income of over \$1,500 per week. This shows that respondent's weekly household income is well above the average weekly disposable household income in NSW which accounts for \$821 in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011b). Only 14.4% of the respondents had a household income of less than \$999 a week while 2% had a household income of less than \$500 a week. A majority (86%) consumed ethnic food one to several meals a day. Cross comparison revealed that the period of stay, occupation and household income vary significantly across the respondents with different patterns of ethnic food consumption.

Results revealed that preference for ethnic food was significantly higher than that for western food (χ^2 -value = 37.80; p -value =0.000). There was a notable pattern in ethnic vs. western food consumption where a majority preferred consumption of ethnic food at home and western style food at work. This clearly indicates that they assimilate food habits of the host country when interacting with the dominant group (Australians) while maintaining the integrity of their ethnic food consumption patterns. This supports the integration strategy described by Berry (2005). Combined consumption of rice and curry was the most preferred ethnic food combination for over 80% of the respondents. Thirty per cent of the respondents indicated that BBQ, grilled and roasted meat are the most preferred western food. Indian/Sri Lankan grocery shops were the most common shopping outlets for rice (71%), dried food (62%) and spices (58%).

The Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of the 12 items used to measure the level of acculturation was 0.808. These measures were used to group individuals based on their level of acculturation. Three distinct groups based on the level of acculturation were identified by cluster analysis. Interestingly, there was a significant difference across groups in terms of acculturation (F -value =10.259, P -value =0.000). Those who consumed several meals of ethnic food a day had significantly different media usage patterns, social interactions and food preferences over the other two groups. This is a clear indication of existence of different levels of acculturation with the dominant society. However, this difference in acculturation could not be explained by their socio-demographic characteristics. Similarly amount expenditure on ethnic food was also not significant across these groups.

Conclusions

This study clearly indicated the existence of different levels of integration with the host society while maintaining a greater level of attachment to ethnic food culture. As Berry

(2005) pointed out this type of integration strategy is viable in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society like Australia where the host society value the cultural identity of migrants. This shows that there is a greater potential for an ethnic market within Australia. Given the increasing rates of migrants from South Asia and preference of unique food consumption there is a remarkable business potential for exporters in the country of origin as well as marketers and producers in Australia. Specially, it would generate a wider market for specialty Asian produce which could easily be catered from Australia. However appropriate food marketing and production strategies are needed to meet the demands of the ethnic minority population in Australia.

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