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An investigation into ethnic Asian food consumption in the Bristol area

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Abstract

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Introduction

Ethnic foods could be defined as all foods (home-made or modified) that are from other countries (Church et al., 2005) or that could be characterised as those from a different culture than the traditional cuisine of the host country (Hamid and Sawar, 2004 cited in EFIR, 2007). In 2008 the total UK ethnic foods market was worth £1.24 billion at retail selling prices. This is characteristically a niche which had, until 2007, expanded at a rate of 2.0% per annum (Keynote 2009). In the context of a mature food market in the UK, the expansion of ethnic food sales provides good scope for companies to capture such a growth (Solomon et al., 2006).

Ethnic subcultures consist of self-perpetuating groups of consumers who are held together by common cultural and genetic ties. The reality is that these sub-cultural memberships are frequently paramount in shaping peoples' needs and wants. Membership of these groups can often be predictive of consumer behaviour, such as food preferences, leisure activities and willingness to try new products. Hence, one important way to distinguish between members of a subculture was to consider the extent to which they retained a sense of identification with their country of origin versus host country (Solomon et al., 2006). Belasco (2008) pointed out that 'we are what we eat and what we eat defines where we come from and where we want to go'. For immigrants, food consumption no longer has the intrinsic function of nourishment, but it is also charged with social, cultural and religious meaning. As a result, one's culture and identity is intimately linked to the foods eaten. As such, Verbeke and Lopez (2005) have alluded to the fact that eating was in fact symbolic of who we are.

In this sense, ethnic and religious identity was considered a significant component of a consumers' self-concept. According to Sook-Lee (2002), cultural identity established by food ethnicity preference and consumption was 'formed by complex configurations of one's awareness of one's own culture and recognition of the social group to which one belongs in practice'. Furthermore, what united an individual with the community was the aesthetic experience, that is, the ability to feel emotion together with others in the community and to share the same ambience (Webster, 1994).

Jamal (2003) proposed that consumers of different ethnic backgrounds were skilled navigators who frequently engaged in culture swapping to sample the many tastes, themes and sounds of different cultures. Moreover, retailers of ethnic foods played the role of cultural intermediaries by facilitating culture swapping by promoting co-existence, tolerance and freedom of lifestyles amongst consumers of different ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, food retailing played the role of cultural intermediary in the construction and negotiation of different identities by consumers of different ethnic backgrounds. Food retailing would work as a catalyst of acculturation facilitating the consumption experiences of an ethnic minority and a mainstream consumer group.

Cultural Identity, Acculturation and Adoption

Maffesoli's argument has some important implications for what is known as ethnic identity. While ethnic identity implies many dimensions, including 'a sense of common customs, language, religion, values, morality, and etiquette (Maffesoli (1996) in Jamal, 2003) and (Webster, 1999:321), identity can also be viewed as a process of self identification whereby individuals define themselves and others into specific groups using different labels. In other words, a person's ethnic identity involves one's sense of belonging to a group, as well as the feelings that go with being part of that group. In this sense, ethnic identity could be viewed as a complex psychological process that involves perceptions, cognition, and affect and knowledge structures about how a person thinks and feels about him or her and others in the society. Since one can experience mixed emotions or ambivalence at a given time, there is every possibility that one can also experience multiple and co existing identities (Chapman, 2000).

On the basis of this, (Oswald 1999: 304) argued that in consumer culture ethnic identity can be bought, sold and worn like a loose garment. He concluded that persons in multicultural societies were likely to have a set of ethnic and other identities that might be differentially salient. In other words consumers are expected to have multiple selves whereby they act differently in different situations and with different individuals. Consumers are thus likely to use the consumption process as materials with which to construct and maintain multiple and co-existing identities.

The role of retailing in such a context could be viewed as a ***cultural intermediary*** whose function is to facilitate the experiences of multiple identities by producing new symbolic meanings and their interpretations. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the proposition that retailing plays the role of cultural intermediary in the construction and negotiation of different identities by consumers of different ethnic backgrounds. This research seeks to fill the gap in the literature by discussing the role of retailing in consumers' negotiations of different identities. The research is based on 'ethnographic' and 'interpretive' study of acculturation of consumption experiences of an ethnic minority and a mainstream consumer group in Bristol, UK

Many authors have tried to conceptualise human consumption decisions (Fishbein and Ajzen (1975); Blake (1999); Kollmus and Agyeman (2002)) and, more specifically, food choice in the models of Herne (1995) and Marshall (2002), amongst others. Consumer decision is based on conscious and unconscious attributes that take into consideration personal characteristics, the surrounding environment, past experiences, information, and intrinsic as well as extrinsic characteristics. The interaction of these various factors plays an important role in determining food choice. In the case of immigrants, price, availability and brands that are easily recognised are relevant determinants in cases of search for key ethnic ingredients. When foodstuff or ingredients are not found, migrants are led to some process of acculturation in order to adapt to a new environment.

Since *enculturation* is the process by which individuals become members of their own culture, *acculturation* means movement, distancing and transformation of individual's choices based on one culture in relation to another. Palumbo (2004) proposed a bi-dimensional model to explain how the immigrant cultural set and the host's country culture interact. Over time, rather than total assimilation, acculturation would take place. In the process of acculturation, immigrants could become integrated, assimilated, separated or marginalised.

Yet, Peñaloza defined 'consumer acculturation as the general process of movement and adaptation to the consumer cultural environment in one country by persons from another country'. Here, individual differences such as age, social class, gender, recency at arrival, language used, the length of stay in the host country and ethnic identity would affect how the process of change took place (Peñaloza, 1994). She mentioned the possible outcome of a process of acculturation would be either to assimilate the host's culture, exhibit a mixed behaviour of accumulation or maintain the original culture. Jamal (1998) concurs with a two-way idea of a transitional acculturative process in which the immigrants are exposed to the host's culture at the same time as the host's nation culture is exposed to the culture of the migrants. Jamal stated that it takes time in order for a full process of acceptance of ethnic cuisines (Jamal, 1998).

Nonetheless, an immigrant's rate of adoption of different aspects of a new culture, for example, products and services, deserves special attention.

Despite Verbeke and Lopez (2005) mentioning that food has strong cultural symbols which are learnt from childhood, it is unlikely that one would give it up at in old age. Glock and Nicosia (1964), cited by Hui et al. (1997), on the one hand, have mentioned that some consumption behaviours tended to relate more closely to key cultural values of an ethnic group and were, therefore, more resistant to acculturative pressures. Moreover, some consumption behaviours may undergo changes even after minimal contacts with another ethnic group. This is what Andreassen (1990) called 'cultural interpenetration', or the exposure of members of one culture to another through either direct or indirect experience. However, aspects of the mainstream culture of the host country are generally expected to be adopted less rapidly by a minority group. Overall Hamid and Sawar (2004) proposed that through acculturation ethnic foods ended up contributing to the diversity of traditional or host cuisine.

Writing on consumption based on ethnic origin, Hui et al. (1998) proposed ethnicity indicators that could be fixed, for example, origin, hence remaining unchanged, even after a prolonged contact period with another ethnic group. Yet, cultural behaviour could be partly influenced by a person's own choice and preference. On the one hand, Hui et al. (1998) have mentioned that some consumption behaviours tended to relate more closely to key cultural values of an ethnic group and were, therefore, more resistant to acculturative pressures. As proposed by the same authors, ethnicity impacting on consumer behaviour was a reflection of a belief that consumption is primarily a cultural phenomenon. In this sense, migrants attempted to reproduce their original food habits through the ingestion of food staples. Hence, resistance towards adoption of foods from the host country would work as a means of reaffirming ethnic origin as the original national food culture is preserved.

Rogers (1983) proposed a model consisting of stages of adoption or acceptance that when applied to ethnic consumption. That model can be adapted to the case of ethnic consumption as a stage one would be when the ethnic population has just started to be part of the host country. As time goes by and with the ethnic group interacting more with the host people some sharing of foods and food ingredients would take place. As a result, a market develops, and shops and restaurants start to cater for the needs of the ethnic population in the neighbourhoods where they are more representative. Consequently, at stage two a new supply chain catering for specific ethnic needs would start to develop in the host's country. As the offer of foodstuff becomes more prominent, local people would start to visit shops and grocery stores catering for the ethnic groups. With increased demand, the market tends to expand. Foreign travel could even support the growth in demand for ethnic foodstuffs resulting in a fourth stage of acceptance where the ethnic food is accepted by the local people who feel confident enough to even prepare specific ethnic cuisines. This would lead to the final stage of total acceptance, characterised by home cooking.

Aims and Objectives

An immigrant's rate of adoption of different aspects of a new culture deserves special attention. In order to further understand the ethnic market, a study was carried out aiming at identifying and analysing consumers' preferences and

motivations for consuming ethnic Asian¹ foods. It was intended to ascertain how Asians in Diaspora related to ethnic food consumption in an area in the UK not studied before.

Methodology

The study has a qualitative nature. Bristol, in the southwest of England, was the focus area of this study because it is renowned for its multicultural society. Overall, Bristol houses some 2.9% of Asians hence providing an excellent opportunity for exploring ethnic food market issues. Secondary data confirmed the strong presence of an Asian community in Easton, a neighbourhood of Bristol as seen from the table below. Firstly, face-to-face interviews were carried out with a sample of owners of Asian food grocery outlets. The outlets had been pre-selected based on the size of the establishment, the length of time in business and some key products they carried. In addition, a questionnaire was piloted and then rolled out from a sample of randomly chosen Asian and non-Asian residents of Easton. Some 129 questionnaires were conducted during the month of March 2008, of which 121 were valid.

Table 1 - Ethnic population of Easton based on national census2001

Race and Ethnicity	Number
White	20,501
Black or African	354
Asian	920
Chinese	321
Other races	203
Total	22299

Source: National Office Statistics (2002)

Results

The respondents sampled consisted roughly of 50% white British, 26% Asian and 24% African-Caribbean. Some 66% were female and 34% males. The gender imbalance in the respondents was not considered a problem as the food buying function is still predominantly carried out by females in Asian and African ethnic communities.

The attraction to Easton by ethnic minority groups was mainly due to affinity of race and culture making it a welcoming and affordable place to live. Consequently, Easton provides its residents with a range of ethnic specialty groceries that cater for their native foods, hence allowing for the different groups to continue their original food habits.

¹ The term Asian is used here for foods and people originated from the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka former British colonies.

Due to the presence of diverse cultures and different food habits in Bristol, the host population, the ethnic white British, have enjoyed eating spicy Asian foods. Different types of spices and condiments in Asian foods was considered exotic, enticing and full of flavour. Contrary to Jamal's findings in the northwest, a minority considered Asian foods as being oily (6%). The overall attribute for attraction for Asian foods was affordability at 36% of the responses.

The availability of Asian foods was not considered a problem. On the one hand, British foods were considered 'easy to prepare', 'healthy' but expensive. On the other hand, Asian foods were perceived as convenient, more varied and cheaper. The majority of respondents have indicated they purchased the ingredients and cook at home. This was followed closely by the purchase of 'take-aways', with a minority preferring to go to a restaurant. Almost half of the sample indicated they consumed some sort of Asian food at an everyday basis, with lunch and dinner being the preferred times for the consumption. No one indicated that they consumed Asian foods for breakfast.

Conclusions

Product availability was an important determinant in ethnic food preference. It was not possible to ascertain whether product development and innovation was an important factor for the respondent in Easton. Evidence suggested that since Asian groceries are purchased largely for home preparation followed by 'take-aways', the consumer demand for more premium ethnic range products could not be proved.

Access to foods of the people's original countries is perceived as facilitating the adaptation of new migrants to a host country, being the main reason Easton act as a main catalyst for migrants.

The respondents also suggested what Jamal categorised as ethnic consumers being 'skilled navigators who frequently engaged in culture swapping to sample the many tastes' (Jamal, 2003). Asian, African and British consumers often experience each others' foods. This confirms Hirschman's (1981) hypothesis as individuals relate towards an ethnic group in degrees. Moreover, this confirms the idea that 'the degree of a person's ethnic identification should largely determine the level of commitment the person experiences regarding the norms of the group (Hui et al., 1998).

In the literature, consumers are likely to use the consumption process as materials with which to construct and maintain multiple and coexisting identities. As also identified in Aguiar (2008), ethnic food consumption in Easton is indeed an expression of identity reflected in the of sense of community, the sharing of aesthetic experiences and the ability to feel emotion together and through a sense of common customs, language, religion, values, morality, and etiquette (Webster, 1999).

The adoption rate for consuming 'the other's' foods is lower regarding the older population. However, the young are more prone to acculturation. The role of the Asian grocery owner in retailing ethnic foods in Easton could not be

underestimated. Retailers could be viewed as cultural intermediaries facilitating experiences of multiple identities as suggested by Solomon et al. (2006). Moreover, greater possibilities of purchasing ethnic foods have allowed for economies of scale in the supply side, which have caused prices to go down. This has benefited all consumers.

Far from exhausting the topic, this study is a snapshot of the existing market dynamics in respect of one product category and one market segment in the Bristol area. This research provides an insight for managers of niche and ethnic categories. Future research would enable the exploring of many more and diverse aspects of ethnic consumption which could not be explored here.

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