Examining Immigrant Turkish Household Food Consumption: Consumer Insights For Food Acculturation Models

Elif Akagun Ergin, Cankaya University, Turkey
Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, Rutgers University-Camden, USA

This research examines the food consumption behaviors of Turkish immigrant consumers who migrate to the United States. This population has migrated steadily over many years and maintains stable populations in specific concentrated areas. The families typically establish close relationships within Turkish communities and maintain homeland food customs throughout numerous years. We report on our findings from depth interviews regarding their typical food consumption practices. The data reveal that food consumption choices are more complex than suggested by acculturation models, incorporating childhood sensory experiences, religious practices, taste preferences, availability of preferred products, and the retention of homeland food practices.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15267/volumes/v37/NA-37

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com.
Examining Immigrant Turkish Household Food Consumption: Consumer Insights for Food Acculturation Models

Elif Akagun Ergin, Cankaya University, Turkey
Carol Kaufman-Scarborough, Rutgers University-Camden, USA

This research examines the food consumption behaviors of Turkish immigrant consumers who migrate to the United States. This population has migrated steadily over many years and establishes stable populations in specific concentrated areas in the Northeastern United States. The families typically establish close relationships within Turkish communities and maintain the food customs of their culture-of-origin throughout numerous years. In the present manuscript, we report on a series of depth interviews with Turkish immigrant consumers regarding their typical food consumption practices and perceptions. This sample is part of a larger study focusing on Turkish immigrant behaviors.

Globalization has given rise to a multicultural society. Researchers have studied the food consumption practices, preferences, and realities of consumers as they emigrate to other cultures. Quite often, unique “hybrids” of their former cultures are created through partial assimilation into the host culture, in this case, the United States. Our study takes the perspective that does not place expectations on the subjects to conform to United States culture, i.e., how much progress they have made in assimilating to U.S. culture. Instead, we are interested in the reality that they have created as members of their own culture while living in the United States. Such realities differ in today’s information-rich world since immigrants to the US are likely to have international cell phones, surf the World Wide Web, and watch homeland programming via satellite television.

Researchers have described assimilation as a process in which an immigrant’s behavior becomes a mixture or blend of two cultures. The norms of the culture of origin become mixed with the norms of the culture of residence (Wallendorf and Reilly 1983). However, certain product constellations that are strongly linked with the home country culture are thought to be resistant to assimilation, and actually may give rise to a system of protected norms that form generally-accepted standards of consumption. Such is the case of food purchase, preparation, and consumption with Turkish immigrants.

Similar to the dense Mexican population in California, the Turkish immigrants seem to create enclaves that can inhibit the acculturation process as they form a “home away from home” in their local communities (Penaloza and Gilly 1999), with small retail stores and even Turkish elementary schools. Moreover, the longer the immigrants stay in the U.S., they appear to become more proficient at “culture switching.” That is, like the Haitian immigrants described in Oswald’s study (1999), the Turkish immigrants are adept at switching from Turkish culture to mainstream American culture based on their specific situation. More often than not, however, their food culture appears to be firmly grounded in Turkish customs, values, and practices, while their employment can be well-integrated into the U.S. labor force.

In order to establish a baseline for food behaviors, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Turkish immigrants regarding their reasons for immigration, their food-related practices, their shopping and food preparation patterns, and foods that they would like to have but cannot buy in the United States. Six females and one male participated in this phase of the study, with ages ranging from 33 to 50 (average age is 41.5). Participants were recruited and selected in order to include representation from various parts of Turkey: two from Istanbul, Esipy (Black Sea Coast), Bolu, Kayseri (Central Anatolia Region), Edirne, and Samsun (Black Sea Coast).

Like many other cultures, Turkey is rich in cultural variations across regions, with food skills, preferences, and local tastes combining to create a foodways culture that is representative of both regional and country customs. The stories of each person’s immigration were similar, although they grew up in different areas of Turkey. Participants were asked to describe how they shopped for food when living in Turkey. The open-ended questions attempted to draw each respondent back into the early formations of their food preferences as well as their present-day practices.

The verbatims were read and re-read to attempt to extract common themes without imposing any anticipated structure to the respondents’ comments following Strauss and Corbin (1988) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Interestingly, numerous comments reflected back to each respondent’s early childhood days spend with their parents, forming their shopping and food preferences. The data reveal that food consumption choices are more complex than suggested by assimilation models, but instead incorporate childhood sensory experiences, religious practices, taste preferences, the desire to maintain cultural food habits, availability of preferred products, and the desire to retain homeland food practices.

This initial phase of our research provided an insightful view to the complexity of Turkish immigrant food behaviors. It is simply not maintaining past food practices nor learning new ones. For instance, participants spoke to us with concerns regarding “hidden” meat by-products that violate religious customs, such as gelatins that are common ingredients in U.S. foods such as the marshmallows in children’s cereals. Additional research is needed to try to unfold how such concerns affect food purchases and practices.

Managerial implications also abound for retailers. Grocery stores, for example, may want to further study whether Turkish customers are able to fulfill their desired purchases within U.S. retail settings. If there is a large enough customer base, it might be in the store’s best interest to open an ethnic section for those ethnic groups that provide a large consumer base in the community.

Selected References

It’s Fake!? Consumers’ Self Creation in a Market with Easy Access to Counterfeit Goods
Marcia Christina Ferreira, EBAPE / FGV, Brazil
Bill Pereira, EBAPE/FGV-RJ. FUCAPE Business School, Brazil

Consumption is a central practice in everyday life supplying meanings and value for the creation and maintenance of the consumer’s personal and social world (Wattabasuwan 2005). Symbolic value and meanings are important for consumers not only because they help retain their former sense, but also because they help them to be categorized in society, communicate cultural meanings, traditions and group identity, as well as to shape and communicate their identity through the meanings attributed to their possessions (McCready 1981; Slater 1997; Belk 1998). Consumption meanings emerge in a dialectical process between its owner and the object as the symbolism assigned to this object reflects both, the image of the subject and the image of the object (Wattabasuwan 2005). An argument well illustrated by Belk (1984: p. 147): “the more we believe we possess or are possessed by an object, the more a part of self it becomes”. Therefore, the dialectical process would not be subject-object, but in fact subject-object-subject.

The present research chooses counterfeit consumption as base to explore the dynamic interaction between consumer actions, the marketplace and the cultural meanings (Arnould and Thompson 2005) and aim to better understand consumer’s self creations via possessions of counterfeit goods. In a marketplace with abundant supply and easy access to counterfeits consumers can alter their behaviour looking for products “with brand” instead of originals giving uncountable justifications for their actions resulting in a consumption “socially acceptable” (Gentry et al 2001). Therefore a market “plentiful” of counterfeits goods was chosen as context for the present research as it allows exploring the phenomenon as relations between an existent culture and social resources as well as relations between possessions and meanings. A perspective not yet explored in the literature.

The majority of existing literature concentrates in profiling counterfeit consumers as well as investigating their consumptions reasons (Penz and Stöttinger 2008) resulting in studies that search for rational answers driven by utilitarian principles. However, profound explanations need to be done beyond correlations between variables which would be better assessed by qualitative research (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler 2006). Counterfeit consumers present distinctive construction of meanings indicating they consider more personal and subjective value in choosing this product (Gentry, Putrevu and Shultz 2006). Since counterfeits are as closely related to the person’s self image and identity as regular products, consumers are capable of transferring part of the meanings from the original to themselves and build their identity, depending on the counterfeit likeness (Hoe, Hogg and Hart 2003).

Looking at the context in question, the literature gives evidence that individuals rate counterfeit consumption as pleasant as regular shopping (Matos Ituassu and Rossi 2007). During their decision making counterfeit consumers might prefer product’s meanings instead of quality or price, suggesting a choice based on product’s usage (Ferreira, Botelho and Almeida 2008). Moreover counterfeits could contribute for consumer’s legitimacy working as symbolic capital and yet becoming socially acceptable (Strehlau, Vasconcelos and Huertas 2006). Finally counterfeit consumer value seems to be ruled by experiences with individuals reacting to meanings existing in original products and then acting through counterfeits as a way to find authentic consumption value, since these goods where mostly consumed playfully and along with non aesthetic value (Ferreira, 2008).

The developing country Brazil was used as research context. In 2008 the turnover of counterfeit goods was between US$ 30 billion and US$ 40 billion, in a country where only 3 in 10 persons do not consume fake products (Bompan 2008). Additionally an anthropologic study shows an abrupt intensification of consumption as a result of economic expansion and political changes. To understand this new reality individuals developed conflicting views putting in one side desires and values and the frustration and political issues on the other (O’Dougherty 2002).

In this marketplace, counterfeit consumers were asked to reflect upon their lifetime experiences while shopping. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire with male and females, aged between 20 and 54 years, living in Rio de Janeiro. The sample, selected by convenience, was collected mainly through face-to-face interviews during 45 minutes on average, in locations chosen by the informants (excluding five phone interviews). The data collected were recorded, transcribed and analyzed individually by the researchers (Miles and Huberman 1994). Additionally, the largest trade centre for counterfeits in the country was used for field observations. Researchers talked with dealers and consumers seeking to better understand the consumptions’ dynamics in that marketplace. As a working in progress, further investigations will be carried out.

When creating meaning counterfeit consumers appear to arbitrate a dialog between object’s representation (counterfeit object) and signification (original object) through rituals of possession determined by distinct levels of self creation. Therefore it’s possible to address this phenomenon in the chosen context as a three-way conversation (subject-object-subject) but with the object divided in two: original and counterfeit. Three levels of symbolic action emerge from the analysis of counterfeit consumer’s self-extension: (a) controlling level; (b) creative level; (c) fulfilling level. On the first level the counterfeit object was possessed by consumers through strict control over their significance. In this case, such product was consumed mainly by their practical characteristics and justified by their utilitarian trade-off. Therefore, such practice has been allocated on the lowest level of self-extension with fewer presence of symbolic action.

On a second level, the consumers seek for symbolic actions that can be determined by their creativity with an objective to personify such possession. On this level the dialog between representation and significance was permanent and led the consumers to reveal [or remember] incessantly their counterfeit consumption to get closer each time to significance inspired by the original good. Extremely knowledgeable of both objects consumers in the third level of self-extension were capable of divestment of most of the counterfeit