

Examining Immigrant Turkish Household Food Consumption:

Consumer Insights for Food Acculturation Models

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, Espiye (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

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