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## “CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN CHOICE OF FOOD AND BRANDING”

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To understand the conceptual link to consumer food choice behavior and learn on how to add to customer value through branding is proposed.

**Methodology:** Through a literature review the paper distinguishes the concepts relevant to consumer behavior and branding. The effects of these concepts while analyzing: consumer behavior in general and their food consumption behavior are discussed drawn from studying various research implications.

**Findings/Practical value:** A number of research studies signifying the influence of the interplay of diverse fields on the consumer behavior in the choice of food and in adding to customer value through branding were identified. The outcomes of these research studies should be of interest to behavioral researchers trying to analyze food consumption behavior among individuals.

**Keywords:** *Consumer behavior, interdisciplinary, diversity, consumer decision making process, brand equity, food conception value, customer value, consumer evaluation of food, branding strategy.*

### INTRODUCTION

All marketing activities are evolved around the ‘consumer’, the key contributor to the growth of the organization. Consumer behavior calls for the study of human responses to the products, services and the marketing mix elements. Food is one of the basic needs of human beings, a source of nutrition for the body, serving a social and cultural function whose consumption has hedonic value. Trying to understand food consumption behavior is highly complex and very challenging because of the diverse influences of a wide range of science and social science disciplines. Over the past many decades there have been tremendous changes occurring in the pattern of consumers’ food choice behavior, visible in the way they go about food shopping and seeking eatery options. This has resulted in organizations opting for modifications in food production, processing and distribution.

In the context of globalization today, we have tried to examine studies involving food choice among consumers from different places. The purpose of this paper is through analysis of various studies develop a framework of food choice behavior and further evaluate the extent to which branding can

influence choice of food. The structure of the paper is as follows. The paper commences with a brief discussion on the terms 'Consumer Behavior' and 'Food Choice' and then an over-view of few studies will help to identify factors affecting food choice. We will then examine certain studies involving influences on food choice behavior and through discussions try to ascertain whether branding can influence food choice among consumers. Towards the end of the paper we have attempted a framework that will show the link between factors influencing food choice and branding.

In short, through discussions and analysis we propose to seek answer to the question whether branding can influence and add value to consumer food choice behavior.

### **'CONSUMER BEHAVIOR' AND 'FOOD CHOICE'**

Consumer Behavior, has been defined as *the decision process and physical activity individuals engage in when evaluating, acquiring, using or disposing of goods and services (Loudon and Della Bitta, 2006).*" The conceptual analysis of consumer behavior is greatly characterized by its **interdisciplinary** (namely, the fields of Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology etc.) nature. The study and analysis of the purchaser's behavior is mainly centered on three variables: the process of decision making in purchasing, factors influencing the purchase behavior and the one of the consumer (Rabontu and Boncea, 2007). Involvement of the many variables and their tendency to interact and influence one another makes the study of consumer behavior very complex. So, typically, models or frameworks of consumer behavior are developed and used to deal with this complexity.

This paper will focus on **Food Choice**, which refers to the human eating behaviour or food selection expressed in terms of what food people *like* and *choose* to eat. We will briefly examine few studies that have identified factors affecting food choice among individuals.

- Sheperd's study (1985), states that factors affecting food choice can be divided into three:
  - \* Food (physical/chemical properties, nutrient content)
  - \* Person (Perception of sensory attributes, psychological factors-personality, moods)
  - \* Economic and Social (Price, availability of brand, social /cultural-attitudes)
- Steenkamp (1993) felt that any comprehensive analysis of food consumption behavior mandates taking into consideration the interactions between three types of determinants or factors, namely, properties of the food, factors related to the person and environmental factors.

*Properties of the food* include the physical and chemical properties and nutrients content (physical form, macro nutrients proportions, fiber contents, energy value) and specific substances (sugar, seasoning, salt etc.). *Factors related to the person* include biological (for instance, sex, age, body

weight), psychological and personality factors. *Environmental factors* include socio-cultural, economic and marketing factors.

- Popkin, Duffey and Larsen's study (2005), illustrates environmental influences on consumers' food choice, physical activity and energy balance. The environment includes macro and community level factors at the external level i.e. economic, legal and policy influences. It also examines ways in which the external environment affects food choice and diet, physical activity and obesity issues among the larger population.

From the above studies we propound that factors which typically affect consumers' food choice are: (a) the food product, (b) the individual person and (c) certain external environmental factors. These factors could influence the decision making process which will then lead to the consumer making a food choice. For instance, assume a family of four visits a 'Pizza Hut' outlet to try out the food offerings there. Their final choice of food will greatly depend on the offerings (its nutritional content), the persons (their age, health consciousness and gender) and external environment factors (culture, social background, price value equation, etc.).

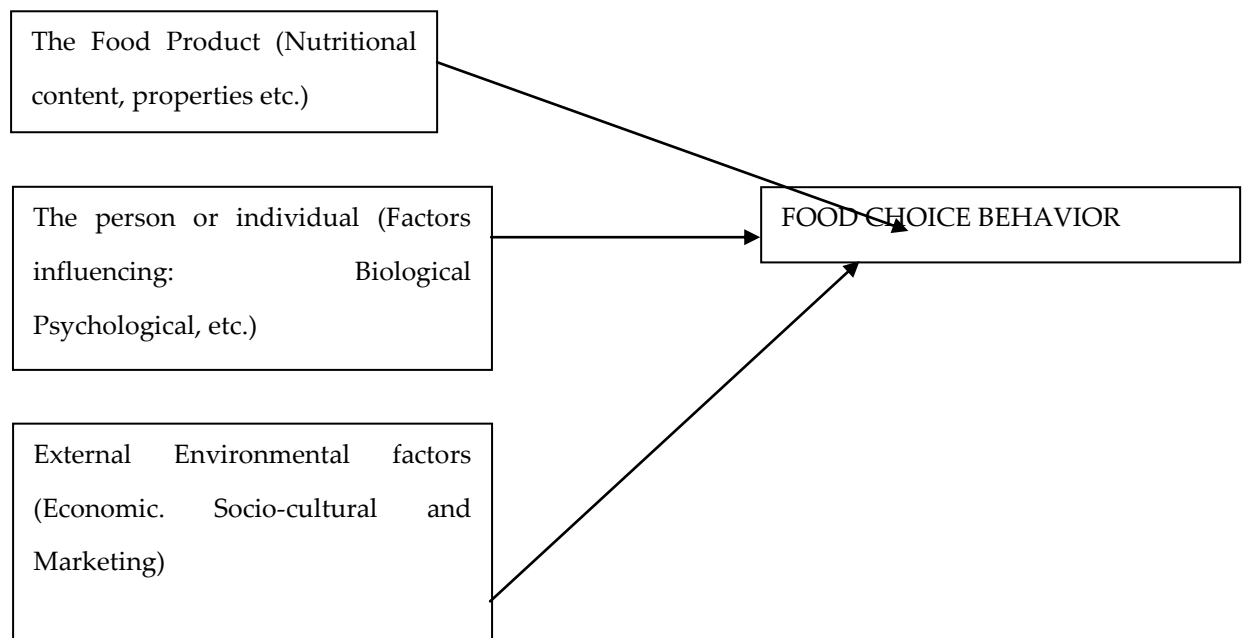


Figure 1: Factors affecting consumer's food choice

## STUDIES TO EXAMINE INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER'S FOOD CHOICE BEHAVIOR :

The consumer behaviour discipline works on the assumption that to be successful, organization's must determine the specific needs and wants of their targeted market and deliver the desired satisfaction better than competitors (Schiffman and Kanuk ,2005).The study of consumer behavior is complex because of its multidisciplinary approach. An early attempt to illustrate this can be traced to

the *Self-Concept theory* (Grubb, Grathwohl, 1967) which laid the theoretical foundation of a model of consumer behavior by examining the relationship between the psychological characteristics (an individual's self concept) and the symbolic value he associates to the goods he buys. Tybout and Hauser's study (1981) called for the creation of a marketing audit based on a conceptual model of consumer behavior which can be used for evaluating marketing strategy decisions. {Marketing audit is a comprehensive assessment of all angles (both internal and external influences) of marketing operations in an organization}. The findings suggest that by measuring the variables in the model and mapping their relationships, the managers will be able to identify strategies for altering consumers' behavior and subsequently evaluate the impact of these also. Another popular representation of consumer behavior is depicted in the Engel, Blackwell and Miniard ,1982 model ,(Loudon and Della Bhatta, 2006) which suggests viewing consumer behavior as a decision process comprising of five activities (motivation and need recognition ,search for information, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and outcomes) which occur over a period of time.

*Analyzing food choice behavior:*

While embarking through various research studies attempting to analyse food choice among individuals, one can gain a perspective on the evolving consumer behavior.

- We start by briefly going through few studies wherein the researchers' attempt to analyse consumer food choice on the basis of a certain *framework or model*.

\* The Meulenberg and Steenkamp study attempted to analyse consumer behavior with respect to food through interplay between behavior and economic research of consumer food choice. Such integrated approaches permitted the researchers to link the behavioral concept to the economic concept characteristics and further extend the findings of the research to more actionable marketing research such as product development.

\* Consumers are very much concerned about the quality and safety of the food they consume revealed a study (Chang, Tseng, Chu, 2013). This study involving consumers from Taipei, in Taiwan attempted to examine the role of a food traceability system that can create value in food exchange. The European Union (EU) General Food Law Regulation defines traceability as," the ability to trace and follow a food, feed, food-producing animal or substance through all stages of production and distribution" (*ibid*, p.1362). The study used a modified 3M framework to examine the relationship between consumer personality (elemental, compound, situational and surface traits) and a food traceability system. The findings revealed that consumers with elemental traits of 'openness, conscientiousness, extroversion and material and body needs' presented the two compound traits of 'need for learning' and 'health consciousnesses'. The latter traits influenced consumer 'concern for food value' and 'perception of food traceability labels'.

- The following studies substantiate that consumer food choice is greatly influenced by the *interplay of certain variables and external factors*.

\* Steenkamp's study (1993) on the basis of review of literature had made a classification of the determinants of food consumption behavior by concentrating on a single or few related factors. This study suggests that researchers from consumer behavior discipline (because of its interdisciplinary background ) need to take a broader approach by integrating determinants from several categories, For instance examine how physical characteristics of the product and social /cultural factors together can influence perceptions on food? How the interactions between cognitive and cultural and physiological induced effects can affect food choice and so on.

\* Luomala's study (2004) with reference to Finnish consumers, emphasized on one food attribute factor, namely, meaning that consumers attach to 'the origin -of-food', which would influence their decision making especially in terms of their attitude, evaluation, willingness to buy and choose food.

\*A study by Pliner and Mann (2004) tried to examine the effect of social influence and palatability on food choice and the amount of food consumed. The experiment revealed that social influence manipulation had no effect on participants' food choices with most of them choosing the palatable food. The findings of the study highlighted the importance of palatability in food eating behaviour. The study demonstrated that when individuals were asked to select from two foods, of which they would eat a moderate amount, (informational) social influence was ineffective in inducing them to consume the unpalatable food.

\* Popkin, Duffery and Larsen's study (2005) had examined the environment (in the external context including both the macro and community level) factors that influences the diet and physical activity, causing health disparities among the U S population. These researchers emphasized on the need to foster interdisciplinary approaches as well as develop an understanding of the factors that mediate and moderate the association between the environment, physical activity and health outcomes.

Thus, the above studies demonstrate that marketers will need to examine the efficacy and impact of the various factors which influence consumer's choice of food when initiating marketing of food products.

- There has been a growing awareness among consumers about the benefits of healthy eating. Such health conscious consumers seek to evaluate the nutritional content value and healthy benefits when making food choices. This aspect is illustrated in the following studies which will throw more light on how consumers make *healthy eating choices*.

\*Bui and Kemp's study (2011), attempted to examine variables that are crucial in the brand building process especially for 'healthy' brands among USA consumers. The findings indicated three essential

variables: brand credibility, commitment and connection, to be of utmost importance for the development of branding strategies for such "Healthy Brands".

\*Bui, et al.'s study (2013) tried to evaluate how parents in the US make food product choices for their children by looking into the nutritional information provided on the label. The findings of the study indicated that parents are more likely to choose healthier options for their children when a food group information system (providing specific nutrient claims complementing a nutrient claim) is utilized.

\*Walsh's study (2014) involving North America University students tried to examine whether priming a healthy eating goal can cause depleted consumers to prefer healthier snacks. This research implied that associating brands with health related claims may or may not affect the consumer food choice, which was dependent on the state of depletion of the consumer. I.e. when consumers are depleted, health related claims are unlikely to have an impact, whereas, in a state of no depletion it is more likely that health related claims affect their food choice.

\* Wang's study (2013) involving undergraduate students from Northern University, Taiwan, tried to investigate consumer attitudes towards visual packaging and its hierarchical impact on perceived food quality and brand preference. The results showed that attitudes towards visual packaging directly influence consumers' perceived food product quality and brand preference and indirectly influences food product value.

The above section of studies imply that with the growing segment of health conscious customers, food manufacturers and marketers need to re-work their product lines and visual packaging to create 'healthy versions' of product brands through effective communication and brand management systems.

- With advances in the field of Science and Technology it is likely that consumer food choice will be more evolved in the future. This mandates food marketers to work towards *creating good food retail experience* and value consumption for a *long term growth*. The following studies will illustrate how food marketers can work towards this.

\*Saarijarvi, Kuusela and Rintamaki (2013) through a case study of a major Finnish food retailer attempted to explore and analyze how Internet based service applications can facilitate customers' post-purchase experiences in food retailing context. This type of service application provided customers four distinct types of information including: Playing, Check-pointing, Learning and Goal orientation, which facilitated their post-purchase food retail (utilitarian or hedonic nature) experiences and the degree of transformation varying from low to high. Such experiences not only generate positive word of mouth but can pave the way for long term loyalty too.

\* Dagevos and Ophem's exploratory study (2013), worked towards the development of a consumer centred concept of value in the field of food i.e., Food Consumption Value (FCV). FCV encompasses

four elements; Product value, Functional value, Process value and Ethical considerations along with Location value and Emotional value. The study propounds viewing value of the food market beyond its traditional 'nutritional aspect' and 'value for money'. It suggests that feelings a food can arouse are valuable intangibles and very crucial for value creation and building competitiveness in the long run. Thus, marketers need to strive towards creating post-purchase positive experience and customer centric value in food consumption for a long term growth.

## **CAN BRANDING INFLUENCE FOOD CHOICE BEHAVIOUR?**

How a brand is identified from the consumers' perspective is the core of a good brand building program. Generally, the power of a brand name is referred to as brand equity. Aaker referred to brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers (Sheth and Mittal, 2003, p.399). For the investors, brand equity will be the brand evaluation measured as the financial worth of a brand name. While, for the customer, brand equity will be the value of the brand when compared to that of the competitor's brands.

- ❖ We will now examine few studies to determine whether branding can influence the choice of food behavior among individuals.

\*Firms need to work towards effective brand building and management because there exists a symbiotic relationship between brands and the cognitive behavior of consumers ( Rajagopal, 2006).

\* Kathuria and Gill's study (2013) in India revealed that while a majority of consumers had brand awareness of branded rice, only half of them were aware of branded sugar. Since the factors influencing purchase of selected branded commodity food products were flavour, aroma and absence of the usage of insecticides/pesticides and adulterants, the researchers felt that marketers need to work towards creating brand awareness among consumers and frame marketing strategies for different market segments based on demographics.

.\* A study to understand 'Adapting to slow food movement and brand management' (2012) and Massa and Testa's (2012) study highlighted the role of ideology in brand strategy with reference to large scale food retailing in Italy. The study concluded that a strong and effective communication retailer ideology that is shared with consumers, who in turn are also asked to participate in the construction of meanings of the retail setting (store layout), can work out to be a powerful tool in brand strategy.

\* While trying to explore the antecedents in a hedonic consumable product such as the chocolate market, it was found that brand satisfaction is the most significant factor for brand loyalty followed by brand value and brand equity (Kuikka and Laukkanen, 2012). This study further indicated that testing



of the moderating effect of the hedonic value showed brand satisfaction on attitudinal loyalty to be significantly stronger among consumers with high hedonic value when compared to consumers with low hedonic value.

\*A study to analyze the relative importance of brand-packaging and taste in affecting brand preferences for manufacturer and store brands in food product categories indicated that once the product is consumed taste is the strongest attribute determining the choice of the preferred stimulus and influence of price and product brand packaging are specific to the product category analyzed (Mendez, Oubina and Rubio, 2011).

The above few studies on the relevance of branding for food products indicate that creating brand awareness, the role of ideology, brand satisfaction, taste, price and packaging duly influence food brand choices. The broad purpose of a brand strategy is to identify ways to develop brand satisfaction among consumers, which will then lead to brand loyalty and ultimately result in brand equity in the long run.

On the basis of the discussions in the paper reiterating the complexity and interplay of the various factors and variables affecting consumer food choice we have attempted at developing a framework which will show how branding can also be used as an aid to the consumer decision making process in this regard.

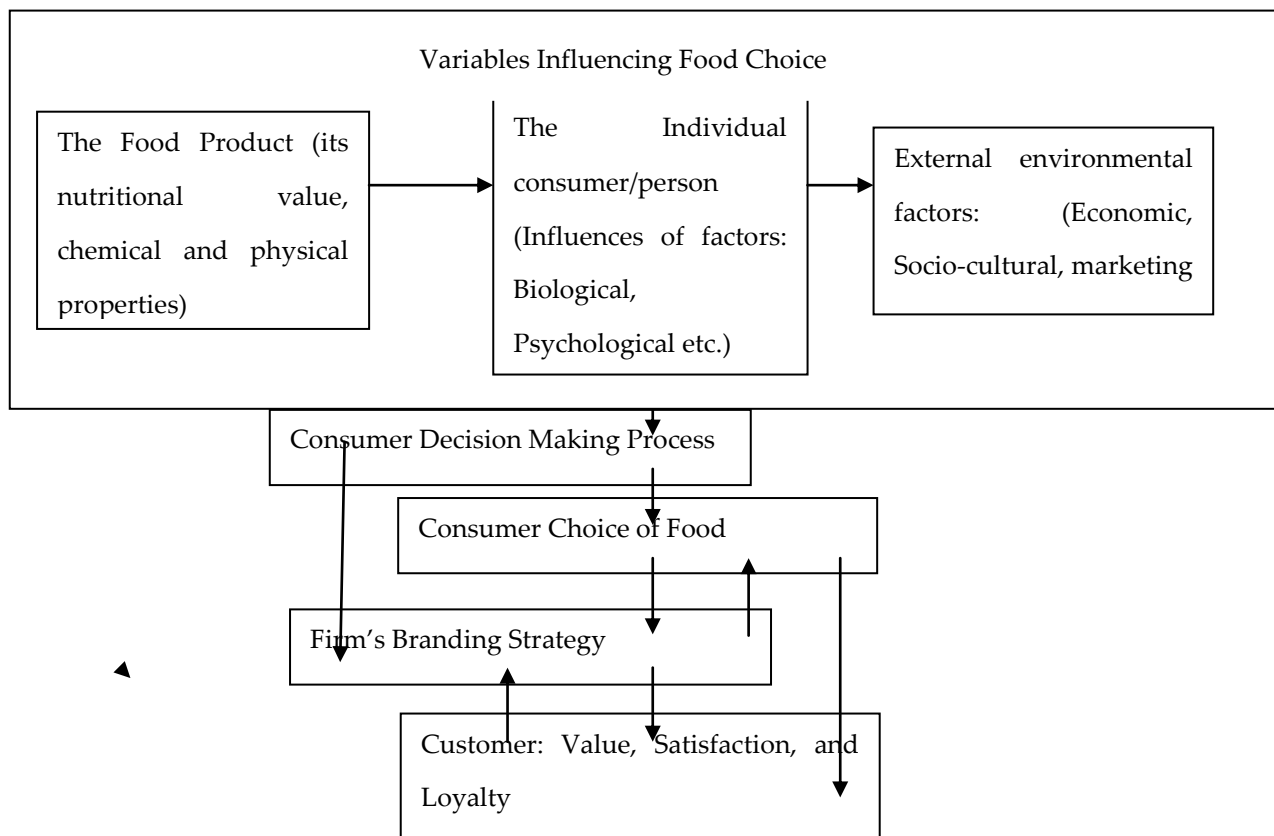


Figure 2: Framework linking factors influencing consumer food choice and branding.

From the above framework one can see that the variables influencing food choice affect consumer's decision making which results in them selecting or choosing the food. This can be observed and used by the firm to work out a branding strategy aimed at increasing customer value, satisfaction and loyalty. Another view suggests that an awareness of the variables influencing consumer food choice and affecting their decision making can be used by the firm to plan a branding strategy which can influence consumers' food choice resulting in enhanced customer value, satisfaction and loyalty in the long run. This reiterates that food marketers can use branding to effectively influence consumers food choice behavior positively.

## CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The above discussion have conveyed that analysing consumer choice of food is highly complex involving the interplay of many variables such as health and nutrition, social and other environmental factors, informational (food labels and packaging) and post-purchase retail experiences .Nevertheless, an understanding of the impact of the various influences can be used by food marketers to work out a suitable branding strategy and create customer (brand) value for their products.

A limitation of this paper is that all discussions and analysis have been done on the basis of secondary research data. A primary data survey would have helped to learn more on the current happenings in this field of study and also substantiate whether the earlier findings hold good even today. Another limitation is that although attempts were made to refer to studies from various regions, it was not possible to obtain much information from many of the developed countries (other than a few) and even from emerging and growing economies such as Asia (barring a few), the Middle East and African countries. Even though consumption of food is a basic need, the social and cultural variations amongst different regions will affect the way it is consumed. So as to obtain a broader perspective, analyzing food choice behaviour of consumers from across the world would be interesting. Today, when the world is referred to as a global village and marketers are seeking to expand their market across seas, it will really be interesting to learn more on the variations in food choice among consumers across various regions, and this also can be an area of probing and researching in the future.

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