



Exploring the online buying behavior of specialty food shoppers

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ABSTRACT

Food producers are experiencing a fast-growing need to use the Internet to enhance competitive advantage. Past researchers have urged the need to understand market segmentation mechanisms as applied to different consumer behavior models to better understand the online buying behavior of consumers. This study integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior and food-related lifestyle to explore consumer's characteristics of online specialty food buying behavior, and the differences in the online buying process among consumers with different FRL. 569 undergraduate students who purchased specialty food online were surveyed. Findings indicated that consumers have positive attitudes toward purchasing specialty food online; more are inclined to heed the suggestions of others, perceive higher levels of control when using a website, and experienced a higher intention to purchase online. The study then classified consumers into 'traditionalists' or 'adventurous and healthy-conscious' groups based on their FRL via a two-step cluster analysis. These two groups of consumers had significant differences in terms of (a) attitudes toward online specialty food buying, (b) subjective norms, (c) perceived control, (d) behavioral intention, (e) demographics and (f) online specialty food-buying behavior. This investigation explored whether there is a correlation between consumer FRL and online specialty food-buying behavior. Findings reveal relevant ways for managers to enhance their website marketing strategies.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has established itself as an important marketing tool in the global market, which can transcend time and geographical constraints. Entrepreneurs are continuously able to retail specialty foods to consumers online. Many studies have now shown that e-commerce holds enormous potential business opportunities (Canavan and O'Reilly, 2004). Academics and practitioners alike believe that the Internet phenomenon can create and/or improve competitive advantage based on two perspectives. First, businesses can integrate and establish a rigorous market segmentation mechanism (Ryan et al., 2004), as market segmentation information can help managers learn more about their target market, take better stock of market during the process of product development (Kotler and Keller, 2006) and increase the possibility of creating and delivering customized products and services through a better understanding of the attitudes and motives of the targeted customer segment. Second, studies have often applied different theoretical foundations (e.g., Technology Acceptance Model [TAM] or the Theory of Planned Behavior [TPB]) to understand online con-

sumer behavior and to reach out to diversified consumer segments to improve sales performance (Koufaris, 2002; Hansen et al., 2004).

The many food production companies (particularly small and medium-sized enterprises) that understand consumer demand are better able to classify their customers and to segment them accordingly. However, very few studies have explored customer food consumption patterns or behaviors (Traill and Grunert, 1997; Ryan et al., 2004), and even fewer studies have explored these patterns in the context of consumer online food-buying behavior. Exploring online consumer behavior provides a better understanding of consumer segmentation in food demand and thus helps to lay the foundation for developing an online marketing strategy for competitive advantage. Kesić et al. (2008) have also suggested that different customer behaviors with respect to different food types should be investigated further.

Many segmentation variables are used to discuss customer food-buying behavior in the food domain, such as demographics, socio-demographics (Chisnall, 1994; Peter and Olson, 1994; Verbeke and Lopez, 2005), motivations and attitudes (McCarthy and Henson, 2005), religious traits (Herndon, 2008), culture/social background (Blundell et al., 2008) and psychographic segmentation (e.g., lifestyle or food-related lifestyle; FRL) (Grunert et al., 1993; Lin, 2002). FRL is one of the most elaborate segmentation tools within the food research field; it helps illustrate how people evaluate food with respect to their individual life values.

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Investigating consumer food-buying attitudes, Ryan et al. (2004) surveyed 1000 consumers in order to examine their food-related lifestyles and socio-demographic segmentation. The results indicated that consumer food lifestyles could be divided into: (1) hedonistic food consumers, (2) conservative food consumers, (3) extremely uninvolved food consumers, (4) enthusiastic food consumers, (5) moderate food consumers, and (6) adventurous food consumers. In addition, Wycherley et al. (2008) argued that these categorizations could help in understanding consumer characteristics by segmenting the food market according to FRL and then evaluating positive attitudes and preference levels toward specialty foods in each of the FRL segments.

Shim et al.'s (2001) adoption of Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model revealed that online food-buying behavior has three classifications. First, food is purchased not only for survival but also as a means to facilitate communication with others; consumer behavior is thus influenced by the cognition of others (i.e., subjective norms) (Hansen et al., 2004). Second, consumers who have the necessary ability and resources (i.e., perceived behavioral control) develop an online buying behavior (Shim et al., 2001). Third, the consumers will utilize personal cognition resource (e.g., attitudes or beliefs) to deal with difficulties and confront risks in online buying.

This study therefore aims to fill this research gap by (i) analyzing market segmentations of consumer demand, (ii) evaluating online food-buying behavior and (iii) developing preliminary online marketing strategy for food retailers. No studies have yet examined the underlying food-related lifestyles of individual consumers with respect to their online specialty food-buying behavior. Therefore, this research, which draws on the food-related lifestyle scale and TPB, seeks to empirically examine online specialty food-buying behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Specialty foods

Defining specialty goods can be a challenging task, as there is no consensus on a universal definition, which is further complicated by the various definitions of specialty goods that are made by firms and for-profit organizations. Wycherley et al. (2008) argued that regional specialty food producers retail high-quality products to encourage higher consumer spending. Accordingly, there are three basic characteristics of such products, namely, premium price, quality and limited distribution products. Murphy et al. (2002) (p. 69) defined specialty goods as 'products outside the mainstream possessing specific qualities, which differentiate them from standard foods'. These qualities are derived from a combination of at least two of the following features: (1) exclusiveness (i.e., the product is produced on a small scale and is therefore only available in limited quantities); (2) processing (i.e., the product has at least undergone primary processing using non-industrial artisan techniques); (3) distinctiveness (i.e., the distinctiveness of the product arises from a combination of all or some of the following attributes: extraordinary packaging, premium price, renowned origin, and/or its unique design).

In addition, the success of the specialty food product market (DTZ Pieda Consulting, 1999) depends on uniqueness, support for local producers (Datamonitor, 2005) and unusual or interesting flavors. Therefore, specialty foods should stress (1) the origins of the food, (2) the producer in order to personify the specialty food, which is done mostly through packaging, and (3) connections between the food and a specific place (Ventura and der Mulen, 1994). Moreover, McCarthy et al. (2001) proposed that food could provide consumers with special emotional meaning through packaging aimed at mak-

ing individuals feel different from other consumers. This may be the case, for example, when consumers purchase macadamia nuts; they may feel satisfied from seeing the peaceful, exotic image of Hawaii on the packaging.

The present study thus argues that local specialty food could enhance consumer impressions of local communities and instill stronger feelings of loyalty and community spirit (Ventura and der Mulen, 1994). Specialty food allows customers to indulge in what they regard as high-quality food (Wittner, 2003). For this research, specialty food is defined as high-quality food with attractive packaging that conveys the image of a local community (e.g., Hawaii's macadamia nuts).

2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The theory of planned behavior is a cognitive model of human behavior (Ajzen, 1985); its core goal is to understand clearly and thus predict defined behaviors. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) suggested that 'intention' can be understood by stipulating that action is influenced by attitude, subjective norm and cognitive control. Oliver (1997) defined intention as 'a stated likelihood to engage in a behavior'. Ajzen (2001) argued that attitude represented an individual's positive or negative perception and evaluation of behavior; subjective norm is defined as an individual's perception of whether people important to the individual think the behavior should be performed; and cognitive control represents the cognitive level of individual behavior under control. The TPB model is a simple and comprehensive framework that encompasses many behavioral factors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

O'Connor and White (2010) investigated Australian functional foods and non-users of vitamin supplements, concluding that the food-buying attitude of participants positively influences buyer willingness. Subjective norms also play an important role in buyer behavioral intention; this has been confirmed by research on marketing and consumer behavior (Baker et al., 2007; Cheng et al., 2005). Lupton (1994) argued that food and cuisine are basic elements in which consumption occurs not only for functional purposes (i.e., to prevent hunger) but also for communication purposes (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996). Social norms have become important factors in influencing individual buying behavior. A number of studies have demonstrated that intention to purchase is positively influenced by the self confidence that consumers have in their ability to perform behavior (Conner and Abraham, 2001; Taylor and Todd, 1995). For instance, Hansen et al. (2004) found that perceived behavioral control, subjective norm and online buying attitude have a positive influence on individual online buying intention. Lam et al. (2007) similarly proved that there was a positive relationship between attitudes, subjective norms and behavioral intention. This research therefore proposes the following hypotheses:

H1. Attitudes toward online specialty food buying have positive influence on behavioral intention.

H2. Subjective norms have a positive influence on behavioral intention.

H3. Perceived behavioral control has a positive influence on behavioral intention.

2.3. Food-related lifestyle

The concept of FRL (Brunsø and Grunert, 1995) can be used to measure people's attitude toward food (Hoek et al., 2004). FRL originated in the 1990s (Brunsø and Grunert, 1995; Grunert, 1993) and has been discussed using means-end chain theory (Brunsø et al., 2004a). Centre for Research on Customer Relations in the Food Sector (i.e., the MAPP Institute in Denmark) established a FRL scale

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