



## Research report

## Influence of ethnocentrism and neo-phobia on ethnic food consumption in Spain

Dena M. Camarena<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ana I. Sanjuán<sup>b</sup>, George Philippidis<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias (INIFAP), Carretera a Bahía de Kino km. 12.6, Col. La Manga, CP. 83220 Hermosillo, Mexico<sup>b</sup> Department of Agrofood Economics and Natural Resources, Centre of Agrofood Research and Technology of Aragon (CITA), Avda. Montañana 930, 50059 Zaragoza, Spain<sup>c</sup> Aragones Agency for Research and Development (ARAIID), Government of Aragón. Avda. Montañana 930, 50.059 Zaragoza, Spain

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 16 November 2010

Received in revised form 7 March 2011

Accepted 4 April 2011

Available online 9 April 2011

## Keywords:

Ethnic food

Nested logit

Ethnocentrism

Food neo-phobia

Indigenous consumers

Spain

## ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, a strong upsurge in Spanish immigration has fostered a thriving ethnic food market. To examine indigenous consumer predilections toward ethnic foods, a carefully designed choice experiment is employed, with particular focus on ethnocentricity and food neo-phobia traits on potential purchase decisions. Employing a two level nested logit model, consumers choose to accept/reject ethnic foods, with a positive response met by a further series of different ethnic cuisine and consumption scenario alternatives. Bivariate tests reveal that higher ethnocentric and neo-phobic segments possess common socio-demographic characteristics, whilst neo-phobia plays a significantly stronger role in determining the probability of rejection. Further tests reveal culturally similar Mexican food as the preferred ethnic food across all consumption scenarios. Moreover, the 'restaurant' is the favoured format of consumption, whilst there is evidence of a strong association between specific ethnic food types and consumption formats. The implications of our research suggest that in the short to medium term, price is a strong strategic variable, whilst marketing strategies must successfully isolate and exploit specific 'ethnic food/consumption scenario' mixes. Finally, stronger messages emphasizing quality and convenience factors are seen as key to bolstering the underrepresented 'home preparation' ethnic food market in Spain.

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## Introduction

Over the last ten years, immigration in Spain has shot up. According to figures released by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE, 2010), the number of immigrants has expanded by over 500% in the last decade. Consequently, the proportion of immigrants as a percentage of the population has increased from 2.3% in 2000 to 12.3% in 2009 (INE, 2010), which has given rise to significant growth in ethnic food demand (Durán, 2006). Ethnic foods can be thought of as an all encompassing image of a country's culture in terms of its traditions, heritage, religion or national origin. Moreover, ethnic food not only encapsulates specific ingredients, but also the method of seasoning, preparing, cooking or consuming, that renders the end product as typical of a particular ethnic grouping.

In general, relatively higher birth rates amongst immigrant populations suggest that ethnic food markets in Spain will consolidate in the long term. Indeed, in the USA where the population consists of an eclectic mix of cultures, these markets

have become 'mainstream', which has generated a number of related consumer based studies (Ayala, Mueller, Madurga, Campbell, & Elder, 2005; Batres-Marquez, Jensen, & Brester, 2003; Satia et al., 2001). The situation in Europe, however, is much more heterogeneous. On the one hand, countries like Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the UK have a much more integrated view of ethnic foods owing to their longer history of immigration.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, consumer perceptions of these products amongst immigrant populations have received (albeit limited) attention in the consumer literature (e.g., Jamal, 1998; Laroche, Kim, & Tomiuk, 1999; Verbeke & Poquiviqui, 2005). On the other hand, for those European countries along the northern basin of the Mediterranean, ethnic food markets are still in their relative infancy as is the related applied consumer literature (Camarena-Gómez & Sanjuán-López, 2010).

A related research question is the extent to which the incumbent population is receptive toward newly introduced food products of foreign origin. Some authors (Lowenberg, Savage, Todhunter, Lubawski, & Wilson, 1979; Sloan, 2001) suggest that factors such as greater foreign trade, improvements in infrastruc-

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [camarena.dena@inifap.gob.mx](mailto:camarena.dena@inifap.gob.mx), [c\\_dena@hotmail.com](mailto:c_dena@hotmail.com) (D.M. Camarena), [aisanjuan@aragon.es](mailto:aisanjuan@aragon.es) (A.I. Sanjuán), [gphilippidis@aragon.es](mailto:gphilippidis@aragon.es) (G. Philippidis).

<sup>1</sup> Given Spain's relatively late economic development compared with other parts of Europe, it is only relatively recently that net immigration has gained momentum, largely fuelled by the construction boom.

ture (favouring tourism) and increased varietal preference in food markets, have stimulated 'domestic' demand for ethnic food products. Notwithstanding, within European markets there is scant literature (Verbeke & Poquiqui, 2005) examining those salient mechanisms which determine an *indigenous* consumer's propensity to reject ethnic foods, whilst for Spain, no such studies exist.

Examining the key characteristics of ethnic foods (i.e., 'new' and 'foreign'), we employ pertinent tools of analysis from related consumer studies to deal with both product concepts. Based on the seminal work of Pliner and Hobden (1992), the food neo-phobia scale (FNS) has been employed in various studies (Flight, Leppard, & Cox, 2003; Henriques, King, & Meiselman, 2009; Lähtenmäki & Arvola, 2001; Raudenbush & Frank, 1999) to assess the degree of (in) congruence exhibited by consumers toward meals or food with which they are not familiar. It is hypothesized that this socio-demographic variable has a powerful cognitive influence over consumer attitudes to ethnic foods. Previous studies have suggested that neo-phobia is inversely related to education levels (Lähtenmäki & Arvola, 2001) or positively related with age (Henriques et al., 2009), whilst Flight et al. (2003) forge a link between rural consumers and neo-phobia. Of more direct interest to this study, Verbeke and Poquiqui (2005) compare between Belgian and immigrant Hispanic attitudes to ethnic foods and confirm the neo-phobic findings of Lähtenmäki and Arvola (2001) and Flight et al. (2003).

A second strand of research employed in this study is the concept of 'ethnocentricity'. First coined by Sumner (1906), this construct later filtered into the marketing literature as 'consumer ethnocentricity' (Shimp, 1984), defined as, "consumer's beliefs in the superiority of their own country's products...rooted in morality...consumer ethnocentricity is intended to capture the notion that some consumers believe that it is somehow wrong to purchase foreign made products, because it will hurt the domestic economy, cause the loss of jobs, and...it is plainly unpatriotic" (Shimp, 1984, p. 285).

Examining US consumer proclivities for domestic products, Shimp and Sharma (1987) proposed, developed and validated a CETSCALE (consumer ethnocentric scale) based on a series of statements designed to characterise consumer's dispositions toward dogmatic, patriotic and politically conservative tendencies. Examining consumer preferences for domestic food products, the CETSCALE has been tested and validated as an explanatory variable in numerous countries including China (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998), Russia (Thelen, Ford, & Honeycutt, 2006), Spain (Luque-Martinez, Ibáñez, & del Barrio, 2000), the UK (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2004), the US, South Korea and India (Kwak, Jaju, & Larsen, 2006). The results of these studies show that ethnocentric consumers are generally of a lower level of income and education, which Shimp and Sharma (1987) suggest may be related to feelings of greater vulnerability to job losses from foreign based competition. Moreover, some studies (Heslop, Papadopoulos, & Bourke, 1998; Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995) suggest that cultural similarity between the home region and the foreign region may even blunt ethnocentric tendencies.

Employing a choice experiment, the aim of this study is to understand indigenous consumer preferences for ethnic foods. Our objectives are to test for the importance of neo-phobia and ethnocentricity as independent and interdependent explanatory constructs in Spanish consumer's preferences for ethnic foods. In particular, we seek to confirm/reject the socio-demographic tendencies exhibited by food neo-phobic and ethnocentric consumers, which are reported in other studies. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study which compares both psychographic variables side by side when examining consumer

dispositions toward ethnic food. Furthermore, examining different types of ethnic food groups, we test the hypothesis of Sharma et al. (1995) and Heslop et al. (1998) relating perceived cultural similarity with reduced ethnocentric tendencies. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Methods section presents the design of the experiment; Results section summarizes the analytical framework; in Results section, the psychographic characteristics are presented; in Discussion section, the empirical application and results are discussed; and finally, some conclusions are drawn.

## Methods

### *Design of the choice experiment*

There are numerous examples of choice experiment studies in the agrofood marketing literature (Alfnes, 2004; Gracia, Loureiro, & Nayga, 2009; Hansen, 2005; Lockshin, Wade, d'Hauteville, & Perrouty, 2006; Loureiro & Umberger, 2007; Mondelaers, Verbeke, & Van Huylenbroeck, 2010; Mørkbak, Christensen, & Gyrd-Hansen, 2010). Typically, a choice experiment is characterised as a trade-off between different alternatives. Each alternative consists of pertinent attributes with different levels, where the respondent is given the option of electing one alternative from a finite list. The choice set between alternative options is formalised assuming utility maximization behaviour which underlies the class of analytical tools known as Random Utility Models (RUM) (Bennett & Blamey, 2001; Hensher, Rose, & Greene, 2005; Train, 2003).

Employing this survey based method, between December 2006 and February 2007, we solicited data from 270 consumers over the age of 18 in the Northern Spanish city of Zaragoza. As a prerequisite, respondents had to be of Spanish origin (i.e., not of immigrant descent), regular food shoppers and had eaten out at least once during the two months prior to our survey. To ensure a representative sample, efforts were made to maintain the gender and age proportions inherent within the population.

In designing the choice experiment, the selection process for attributes and levels was based on a careful study of the city's food supply. For the choice set, three consumption situations were drawn up, namely 'restaurant', 'take-away or home delivery', and 'home prepared'. Furthermore, based on an initial pilot survey examining familiarity with ethnic foods, we classified the diversity of cuisine in Zaragoza into three broad categories: Mexican, Chinese and Arabian.<sup>2</sup> We deliberately excluded more culturally integrated or geographically proximate options, such as French or Italian, from the analysis. In order to select realistic prices for our experiments, for each ethnic cuisine, the menus of at least two restaurants and/or fast-food outlets were consulted beforehand. Likewise, five distribution chains that regularly sell ethnic food were also visited and the prices of a range of products were recorded.

In order to allow for a more realistic association between a price and consumption situation, thereby minimizing implausible combinations arising from a common set of prices, a labelled choice experiment was designed where the labels communicate information on the consumption situation. The levels chosen for

<sup>2</sup> Employing open ended responses, we discovered that the majority of consumers frequently referred to foods emanating from Mexico (Guacamole, Burritos, Tacos, Nachos, Fajitas, Mexican beans), China (spring rolls, sweet and sour) and Arab countries (cuscus, dönnner kebab, falafel). In the ranking of knowledge, cuscus occupies the first position (13.4%), followed by guacamole (9.5%), Spring roll (8.5%), sushi (6.7%) and dönnner kebab (6.1%). In the city of Zaragoza, there are 886 restaurants, 106 of which serve ethnic cuisines. Chinese accounts for the biggest market share (53.8%), followed by Arab (9.4%) and Mexican (7.5%) (Ayuntamiento de Zaragoza, 2008; IAEST, 2008a; Red Aragón, 2008).

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