

# Understanding cultural differences and health consciousness in dietary choices: a theoretical model

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## Abstract

Culture plays traditionally a crucial role in determining consumers' adoption in terms of dietary choices, along with communication of food daily guidelines. Despite that, little is known about behavioural factors orienting dietary choices in consumers. Drawing on Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) customer journey framework, the present study aims to create a conceptual model, which can explain how culture and health consciousness can affect consumers' lifestyles in pushing responsible dietary purchases. The paper ends by offering new directions and path-lines for future research, along with explaining theoretical and managerial implications for scholars and practitioners.

**Keywords:** Culture; Food sector; Consumer lifestyles; Health consciousness; Responsible dietary purchase; Customer journey.

## 1. Introduction

*“Man is what he eats”* (Feuerbach, 1804-1872).

With this famous sentence, Feuerbach would like to highlight the crucial role played by food and beverage in individuals' eating habits to explain his main person's characteristics and decisions.

This affirmation posits a specific focus on the importance of dietary choices, which was increased over time (Savelli and Murmura, 2023; Wongprawmas et al., 2021). Since health was recognised as a determinant of food choices (Sorić et al., 2021; Hopwood et al., 2020), researchers started to investigate the variables across the relationship between health/responsible-dietary choices. Some detect a difference

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in generation cohorts in consuming sugars, with a specific interest in younger generations (Bleich et al., 2018; Nour et al., 2017), whereas others analysed the association between unhealthy dietary choices and the increase in obesity, diabetes and hypertension (Cho & Kim, 2022; Ishida et al., 2020). The same happens referring to responsible dietary purchases, where scholars depicted some constructs such as attitude, environmental concerns, perceived behavioural controls, subjective norms and willingness to pay to push young consumers in preferring responsible products over other options of consumption (Kumar et al., 2021).

In this aspect, also communication from official channels (e.g., the government) and companies play a crucial role in informing consumers towards daily nutrition guidelines (Borges et al., 2023; Kraak and Story, 2015). For instance, the Italian National Task Force published 2018 a dossier to help citizens reach safe and healthy daily nutrition (FAO, 2018), increasing the level of consciousness related to food and nutritional daily needs. The same happens in other countries, such as France (Ministry of Health, 2012) and America (OASH, 2023), where the governments provide people with some dietary advice to meet nutrient needs, promote health, and prevent disease.

In addition, also the cultural role plays an important role in determining dietary guidelines. In fact, for many countries such as Italy and France, food has a social meaning for consumers (Revilla and Salet, 2018; Thomson and Hassenkamp, 2008; Lupton, 1994). It is well-known for the famous Italian dietary guidelines called “*Dieta Mediterranea*”, which is characterized by a resilient and sustainable model, which follows factors such as seasonality of ingredients, biodiversity and frugality (in terms of moderate portions), being highly suggested by specialists worldwide (Clodoveo et al., 2021). Moreover, some studies detected that junk food is associated with feelings like pleasure and independence and freedom in younger consumers (Chapman and Maclean, 1993), whereas healthy food is often associated with societal pressure to remain thin (Jovanovski and Jaeger, 2022) or parental habits (Chapman and Maclean, 1993).

Despite that, promoting responsible dietary behaviour requires not only deep and good communication but also a deep comprehension and consciousness of potential drivers that can push responsible intentions in consumers. In this line, few studies have investigated both behavioural factors orienting dietary choices (Carfora et al., 2022; Savelli and Murmura, 2023; Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al., 2021)

Thus, the present research aims to study which is the role played by culture and health consciousness in adopting specific consumers’ lifestyles and pushing responsible dietary purchases. To do so, the rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 will propose the theoretical framework we decide to use to create our theoretical model. Then Section 3 will show the theoretical model, highlighting the relationship between the variable investigated in the literature. The paper ends by

highlighting the main theoretical and managerial implications of this model, along with presenting limitations and lines for future research.

## **2. Lemon and Verhoef's theoretical framework**

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), during a shopping experience, consumers live a real "journey", which brings individuals to experience a totalizing experience. Specifically, the two authors suggested that consumers' shopping behaviour passes between three phases, called pre-purchase, effective purchase and post-purchase. In particular, the *pre-purchase phase* covers all the external influences (e.g., feedback by friends and family) and information (e.g., searching on the internet about the quality and functional characteristics of the product) that can help the consumer to decide to buy or not the item. The *effective purchase* phase reflects the moment of the decisionmaking, where the consumer decides to pay for the product.

Endly, the *post-purchase* phase refers to all the consumers' experience with the product after the purchase, covering aspects such as the post-service system, positive word-of-mouth and negative feelings that push consumers to return the product (Serravalle et al., 2022).

Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) framework was highly adopted in marketing literature to understand customer behaviours in different scenarios (Tueanrat et al., 2021; He and Zhang, 2023), whereas to the author's knowledge, there are no studies investigating the role of culture and health consciousness in consumers' lifestyles and responsible dietary purchases referring to this framework. Thus, the present paper aspires in extending previous knowledge related to the customer journey framework, going deeper into the process that pushes responsible food and dietary choices from the prepurchase step to the effective one.

## **3. Proposition development**

### **3.1. The Role of cultural background in food choice**

Culture plays traditionally a crucial role in consumers' attitudes towards food choices (Jeong and Lee, 2021). According to some scholars, the cultural framework behind individuals influences how food is perceived and accepted by modulating their tastes and guiding their preferences (Laaksonen et al., 2020).

Thus, to deeply predict and maximize consumers' preferences in terms of food choice it becomes important to both the ability to understand how consumers could be affected by cultural background and have a deep knowledge in terms of cultural aspects (Hay et al., 2021).

In this term, many authors describe how culture can affect individual behaviours, introducing different variables to investigate this relationship (Hofstede, 2011; Jeong and Lee, 2021; Singelis and Brown, 1995). Specifically, Hofstede (2011) describes six dimensions, called the 6D, where consumers are analysed depending on their level of power distance (i.e., the degree of acceptance of inequalities in a society), long-term orientation (i.e., prioritising actions with a future view), masculinity vs femininity (i.e. the preference of some society to masculine characteristics, such as success and competition rather than feminine ones like empathy), individualism vs collectivism (i.e., the high degree of interdependence characterize collectivism society, where people belong to a group in contrast to individualism ones), indulgence (i.e., the level which society attributes importance to natural human needs related to having fun and enjoying life) and uncertainty avoidance (i.e., how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known). Hofstede's model is still highly applied in the literature in different fields (Nikolakis et al., 2022; Serravalle et al., 2022; Blut et al., 2022), bringing many contributions to understanding how people behave depending on their origins.

Another interesting model developed recently is by Jeong and Lee (2021). These authors described the cultural role in food choice as a relationship between some determinants, able to influence their sensory preferences, specifically: familiarity (i.e., individual experience with a product; Nacef et al., 2019), expectations of stimuli (e.g., tastes; Hay et al., 2021), information on food benefits (in terms of health advantages; Nguyen et al., 2019), labels (Li and Dando, 2019) and, endly, the role of government policy (e.g., the legalization of some foods, such as the consumption of insects to substitute meat; Mancini et al., 2019).

All the variables abovementioned (both in Hofstede's work and in Jeong and Lee's) can affect directly individuals to adopt different lifestyles.

According to us, this happens especially before taking the purchase or consumption decision, specifically when the consumer is searching for information for instance by reading labels or recollecting memories of a past purchase.

Thus, the following proposition comes up:

*P1: Culture positively affects consumers' lifestyles in the pre-purchase step of the customer journey.*

### **3.2. Health consciousness in consumers' lifestyles.**

Consumers display varying levels of health consciousness concerning their eating behaviour, with some individuals perceiving healthy eating as crucial for illness prevention and thus being more inclined to purchase organic (Schifferstein & Oude

Ophuis, 1998) or functional foods (Chen, 2011). A practical example could be represented by health-conscious individuals, where the exposure to images of physically fit people exercising and superfood biscuits with higher plant protein content evoked stronger arousal compared to less health-conscious individuals (Banovic & Otterbring, 2021). In this line, health awareness related to dietary habits is positively correlated with the acceptance of interventions aimed at reducing sugar intake within the general population (Hagmann, Siegrist & Hartmann, 2018). Therefore, diet-related health awareness directly impacts people's attitudes and behaviour in the domain of dietary choices. Numerous studies have provided evidence supporting the construct and predictive validity of the diet-related health awareness scale (Dohle, Hartmann, & Keller, 2014; Hartmann, Siegrist, & van der Horst, 2013; Siegrist & Hartmann, 2019).

Furthermore, Dutta-Bergman (2004a) includes health awareness as a significant element of health orientation, encompassing aspects such as health information orientation (e.g., willingness to seek health-related information). This research reveals that consumers with higher levels of health awareness engage more actively in seeking health information (Dutta-Bergman, 2005), retain more health-related information (Dutta-Bergman, 2006), and report learning more about health-related topics from news and talk shows (Dutta-Bergman, 2007).

Thus, individuals with greater health self-awareness exhibit heightened attention toward health information conveyed through mass media channels. In addition, Moorman and Matulich (1993) observed that health knowledge increases the acquisition of health-related information from various media sources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio programs, and advertisements), likely because information serves as a pivotal source of empowerment for those possessing greater health knowledge. Additionally, Tian and Robinson (2009) state that greater health knowledge is linked to increased information consumption from mass media and is positively associated with incidental exposure to health-related information through these channels. Consequently, consumers with higher health awareness are likely to appreciate health information more and perceive it as more reliable. In this line, we write up the following proposition:

*P2: Health awareness positively influences the level of consumer communication in the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey.*

Moreover, health awareness is an intrinsic attribute that manifests itself through healthy lifestyles and behavioural orientations (Jayanti & Burns, 1998), such as the healthy lifestyle that aims at achieving and maintaining physical, emotional and nutritional well-being (Težak Damijanac, 2019), and the healthy and sustainable lifestyle, which places more attention to the environment and the community (Choi & Feinberg, 2018). Therefore, health awareness becomes intrinsically linked to behavioural responses. This is evident with consumers with greater health

awareness tend to engage in proactive behaviours (e.g., including a greater propensity for preventive health measures (Moorman & Matulich, 1993) as well as display adaptive coping strategies (e.g., the adoption of stress management techniques, like meditation or progressive relaxation). Those behaviours lead to an increase in the decision to be personally engaged in health-promoting activities, such as the consumption of fruit and vegetable and practising regular exercise (Iversen & Kraft; 2006).

These lead to the following proposition:

*P3: Health consciousness positively impacts consumers' lifestyles in the pre-purchase step.*

### **3.3. Consumer lifestyle and responsible dietary purchase**

The role of consumers' lifestyles is likely to influence their responsible consumption (Aydın and Ünal, 2015). In fact, according to Lubowiecki-Vikuk, Dąbrowska, & Machnik (2021), a responsible lifestyle in shopping requires greater consumer

engagement than other lifestyles. In the meantime, sustainable behaviours are often reflected in the way people manage their homes, use transportation, or manage their leisure time (Black and Cherrier, 2010; Barr et al, 2011; Verain et al, 2012; Hicks and Kuhndt, 2013; Shirani et al, 2015; Seegebarth et al., 2016; Miller, 2018; Laurett et al,

2019). Therefore, consumer lifestyle affects responsible dietary selection (Aydın and Ünal, 2015).

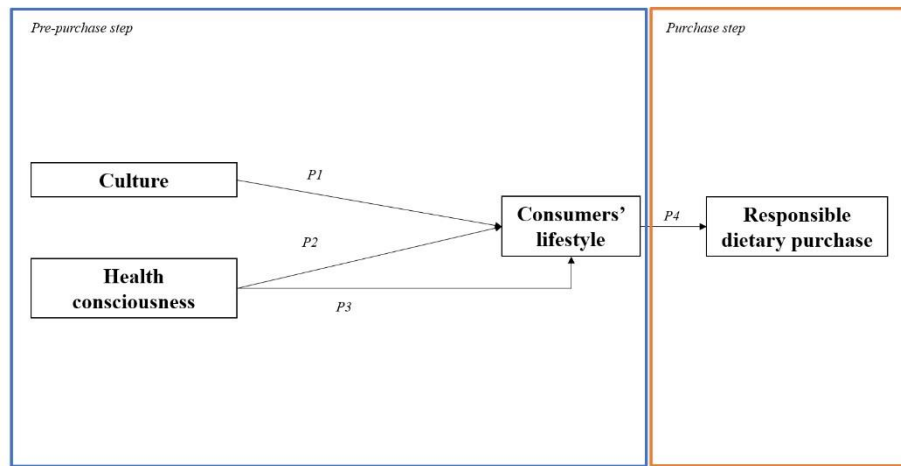
According to us, there is a relationship between the lifestyle consumers adopt and their dietary purchases. Some authors stated that the simpler the life consumers decide to live, the more sustainable will be their purchases (Seegabarth et al., 2016; Laurett et al., 2019). Thus, responsible dietary purchases (e.g., avoiding food waste, buying OGM-free products, preferring short circuits and biological products) could be highly affected by the lifestyle individuals choose.

From the above considerations, we raise the following proposition:

*P4: The higher the consumers' lifestyles, the lower will be the responsible dietary purchase.*

Figure 1 shows the proposed model.

Figure 1: The theoretical model



Source: personal elaboration

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1. Discussion of results and theoretical contributions

The present paper, conceptual in nature, aims in investigating the role of cultural background and health consciousness in affecting consumers' lifestyles and responsible dietary purchases. Specifically, the proposed model extends previous knowledge on the direct relationship between both cultures (Laaksonen et al., 2020; Hofstede, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2019) and health consciousness (Dutta-Bergman; 2004a; Moorman & Matulich, 1993) and behaviours, by showing that these two relationships are both mediated by consumers' lifestyles to suggest responsible dietary purchases such as buying biologic or preferring short circuits (e.g., Km0 products).

In addition, by integrating Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) framework, the proposed model highlights the role played by culture, health consciousness, and consumers' lifestyle in the pre-purchase phases, corroborating pieces of evidence on the crucial role played by this variable in this phase, along with the responsible behaviour in the purchase phase.

### 4.2. Managerial contributions

From a managerial point of view, this study points out interesting insights to companies that work with different cultural subsets. Depending on consumers'

culture, they can offer ad hoc advertising to engage individuals more, depending on their cultural subsets. In addition, companies working in the food and beverage sector should also pay attention to different consumers' health consciousness, trying to be more transparent and deductive to them and compensate for the knowledge of those with a low level of health consciousness and attract individuals' attention when they have a high level of health consciousness.

Then, interesting contributions could be offered also to policymakers and governments, that work in terms of offering health campaigns, to communicate responsible messages to consumers in a more targeted and diverse way. Further increase and diversification of communication campaigns could steer toward responsible lifestyles, such as offering a toolkit to reduce food waste and organizing local workshops to use expiring food for creative cooking.

To do so, local policymakers should work in enhancing the level of engagement in these topics, making consumers understand more and more the importance to adopt responsible lifestyles, which pushes for responsible dietary choices.

#### **4.3. Limitations and next steps**

The theoretical nature of this paper embedded many limitations, which could be covered by further studies. Firstly, new studies are demanded to test the proposed model with consumers in different countries. Specifically, it could be interesting in making longitudinal studies where both collectivistic countries (e.g., China and India) and individualistic ones (e.g., Italy, France, and the USA) are analysed to depict the mediation role of consumers' lifestyles, along with the one played by the two independent variables.

Then, new studies should enhance the model, by analysing what happens in the last phase of the customer journey framework, i.e., the post-purchase, studying which are consumers' feedback, opinions and durability in adopting responsible dietary choices.

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