

Caring & Belonging: how the biological need to connect shapes food choices in consumer acculturation.

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Abstract

This study examines the acculturation strategies that Syrian immigrants residing in Brazil perform through food consumption. By adopting an approach that integrates Evolutionary Psychology and the Theory of Basic Values, we conducted a series of 19 laddering interviews to explore the cognitive structure of the consumption of home, host, and *Global food*. Our findings revealed that immigrants negotiate cultural meanings by navigating thought food choices that are influenced by fundamental motives of affiliation and *Kin Care*. The research highlights the dynamic nature of acculturation, showing how immigrants adapt to their new environment by balancing preservation of former social ties with construction of new ones. This work offers insights into consumer behavior in multicultural contexts and provides valuable information for policymakers and marketers in culturally diverse markets, especially in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Keywords: food acculturation; fundamental motives; universal values.

Track: Consumer Behavior

1 INTRODUCTION

After moving to a new country, immigrants find themselves in a new culinary landscape that is markedly different from what they are accustomed to. Faced with a new food culture, immigrants are challenged to discern what is safe to eat and learn how and when to eat it. To simplify this process, individuals organize foods in categories that symbolize the boundaries and intersections of cultural groups, making goods symbols of culture and identity, as well as metonymies of "us" and "them" (Bardhi, 2010).

Previous research has shed light on the dynamic interplay in which immigrants engage when navigating through the categories symbolizing home and host culture through food consumption (Bardhi, 2010; Capellini, Yen et al., 2018; Yu, et al., 2019) yet the ultimate motivations and mechanisms behind these negotiation processes remain underexplored. Overall, acculturation studies have been limited to exploring immediate and surface-level factors, such as social or environmental influences, overlooking how human instincts influence the ways individuals adapt to new culture (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2023).

To provide a deeper understanding of the fundamental motives underlying acculturation phenomena, we turned to Evolutionary Psychology (E.P.). By adopting an integrated approach, this work investigated the fundamental motives behind the acculturation strategies that a group of Syrian immigrants residing in Brazil perform through food consumption.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, the field of acculturation research has been facing the challenge of theoretical saturation, leading to a call for new approaches (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2023). Responding to this call, scholars have advocated for the adoption of an evolutionary perspective to acculturation research (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2023). Overall, these claims suggest that combining insights from acculturation psychology and cultural evolution can provide deeper understanding into the human nature of acculturation (Kunst & Mesoudi, 2023).

Evolutionary Psychology (E.P.) operates under the assumption that the human brain has evolved accordingly to the same principles of natural selection as any other organ, resulting in a complex system of mechanisms designed to solve the same problems our ancestors faced during the Pleistocene period (Tooby, Cosmides & Barkow, 1992). Its metatheoretical nature allows for a unifying perspective to multiple approaches to human behavior by focusing on the ultimate (evolutionary) and proximate (direct) causes of behavior (Buss, 2015; Tooby, Cosmides & Barkow, 1992). In consumer research, E.P. is often adopted to explore how evolved cognitive mechanisms, crucial for ancestral survival, influence modern consumer choices (i.e. Richerson & Li (2020)).

Kenrick et al. (2010) offered a multi-level analysis of human behavior, including proximate, ultimate, and functional aspects of motivation by revising Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs under an evolutionary perspective. Subsequent studies, such as Aunger and Curtis (2013), further explored evolutionary motives, identifying specific motivational systems evolved in response to ancestral selection pressures. Griskevicius and Kenrick (2013) contributed to advances to the field of consumer behavior by demonstrating that fundamental motives underly consumption choices by triggering reward mechanisms that are justified on a proximate level, suggesting that our consumption decisions reflect cognitive representations of human needs.

Given that values are social representations of human needs (Rokeach, 1973; Gouveia et al., 2008), we rely on the Theory of Basic Values (Schwartz et al., 1992) to build the link between Culture and Biology. The theory is based on the existence of a set of basic values that have been consistently identified across a diverse range of cultural contexts and are grounded on the basic requirements of human existence: needs of individuals as biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival and welfare need of groups (Schwartz et al., 1992).

According to Gutman (1982), individuals use consumption to fulfill their core values. This process involves a structured cognitive pathway where product attributes are linked to specific consequences, ultimately satisfying personal values. Building on this premise, prior research has effectively elucidated how consumers bridge the gap between tangible product choices and abstract personal goals (i.e. Tey, 2019).

Overall, these studies suggest that acculturation strategies that consumers perform through food consumption can be traced back to the basic needs of human existence. Based on these principles, we conducted an exploratory study to investigate the underpinnings of acculturation strategies that a group of Syrian immigrants living in Brazil perform through the consumption of Home, Host and *Global food*.

3 METHODOLOGY

Exploring the evolutionary origins of human behavior involves reverse engineering, which means analyzing the mind as a complex system and breaking it down to understand each component's function (Buss, 1995). This process entails organizing observations into a cohesive map of causal structures that represents how the mind works (Tooby, Cosmides & Barkow, 1992).

Consumers group products into categories according to the benefits they provide (Gutman). Similarly, three consumption categories have been consistently identified in the literature on food acculturation: Home, Host, and *Global food*. *Home food* refers to the

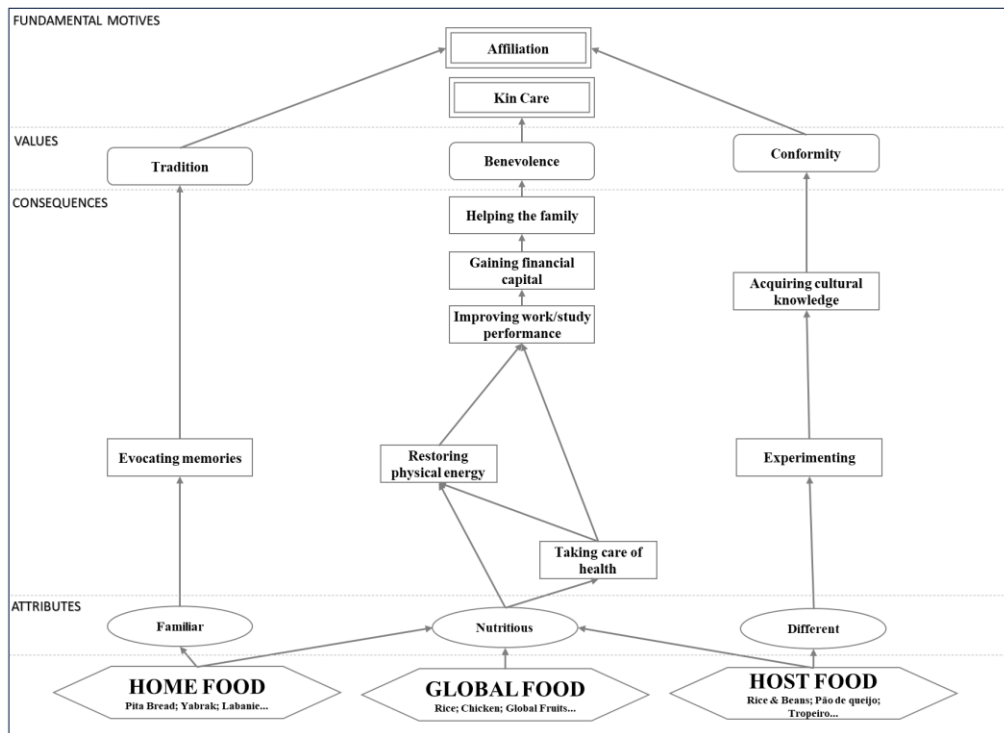
Traditional cuisine of an individual's country of origin, while *Host food* represents the local cuisine of the new environment (Yu et al., 2019). *Global food* encompasses the foods that are common in both cultural contexts, such as global brands (Yen et al., 2018). For reverse engineering the consumption of these three categories, we conducted a series of laddering interviews with Syrian immigrants residing in Brazil.

Laddering consists of a qualitative research tool for unveiling the hierarchical structure of decision-making, that enables portraying how interconnected product attributes, consumption consequences, and personal values are in an individual's mind through the construction of illustrative maps of means-end chains (Wansink, 2003). The interviews, conducted in both Portuguese and English, were carried out until theoretical saturation was achieved. They lasted between 30 to 90 minutes and were recorded upon consent. Participants first listed their most consumed foods in Brazil, which were categorized as Syrian (*Home food*), Brazilian (*Host food*), or Both/None (*Global food*). Then, they answered series of open-ended questions that moved progressively from exploring the “means” (food category attributes) to unveiling the “ends” (fundamental motives) underlying their consumption choices.

3.1 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and content-analyzed. Relevant information was labeled and classified in attributes, consequences, values (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), and fundamental motives (Kenrick et al., 2010; Aunger & Curtis, 2013, Griskevicius, 2013). Codes were attributed to each label and used to build an implication matrix for each one of the three food categories: *Host food*; *Home food*; and *Global food*. To identify the most relevant relationships, only chains with at least 4 relations were considered for the final matrices. A hierarchical value map (HVM) was constructed from the implication matrices portraying the ladders that included all the four levels of motivation (Attributes – Consequences – Universal Values – Fundamental Motives) for each food category. Finally, the maps were integrated into one general map to portray the dynamic and fluid aspect of consumer acculturation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: General Consumption Map by the authors



4 FINDINGS

The interviews elicited the different strategies Syrian immigrants performed to cope with acculturation through food consumption in Brazil. They revealed that different values like *Tradition*, *Benevolence* and *Conformity* motivated the consumption of different foods. More interestingly, the interviews demonstrated that the consumption of different food categories is often motivated by the same needs: *Affiliation* and *Kin Care*.

4.1 Affiliation

Being part of a group was crucial for the survival and reproductive success of our ancestors as it helped them with adaptive problems of the Pleistocene period, such as reducing predation risk, enhancing offspring care, and promoting technological innovation (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016). Consequently, the human mind evolved to socially connect. While social bonding triggers neural pleasure circuits, isolation causes suffering and even physical pain (Lieberman, 2013).

Interestingly, the ladders pointed to both the consumption of *Home food* and *Host food* being motivated for the fundamental motive of affiliation. While the strategy of consuming Different food for forging new social bonds was identified motivating the consumption of *Host food*, consuming Familiar food to preserve group unity emerged as strategy motivating consumption of *Home food*. This is particularly noteworthy, because although *Home food* and *Host food* have been identified as preclusive categories associated with opposite attributes of Familiar and Different, our results demonstrate that they serve as means to the same end:

bonding. In agreement, prior studies have stressed that immigration can accentuate the feeling of loneliness. This is expressed by the statement of an informant: "When you're in another country, you're almost alone. Not alone, alone... but it's important not to feel like you're in a foreign country. You want to feel like you're a little bit at home" (P12, age 18).

The affiliation motive was expressed through the basic values of Tradition and *Conformity*. Indeed, according to Schwartz (2012) they are both social values that are closely motivated. Their major difference lies specially in their orientations; while the first entails a commitment to past expectations, the latter demands subordination to expectations of people whom individuals interact with in the present. Overall, both motivate actions of submission to external expectation. Consistently, our results demonstrate that *Conformity* is an expression of immigrants' desire to forge new social bonds in the host culture, since demonstrating social cohesion is strongly expected among cooperative members of a group (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016).

I consider myself half-Brazilian. Because we have a saying: If you live with people for 30 days, you are theirs. So, I am Brazilian now. Then I have to know more things about Brazil. I have to know more things about the country I am living in, the country I am developing in. (P12, age18)

Immigrants frequently experience social pressure to align with the majority, stemming from a desire for acceptance or fear of rejection. When people conform to prevailing norms and behaviors, they gradually assimilate the dominant group values. *Conformity* can be viewed as an adaptive strategy for immigrants as it makes it easier to navigate their new environment, minimizing social tension and enhancing fitness (Kust, 2023).

Our data revealed that the basic value of *Conformity* motivated the desire to learn about the new culture. Much of what we learn is with and through others (Lieberman, 2023). In public settings, immigrants have the opportunity to model locals' food behavior, what enables them to signal their affiliations with desirable social groups, which is a fundamental mechanism for cultural learning (Richerson et al., 2020). Thankfully, the human brain is adapted with cognitive mechanisms to interpret social cues that makes it possible to learn through socialization. (Lieberman, 2013). The importance to learn to act in accordance with the host group is clear in expressed in participants sayings: "Because as we are in their country, in this case, in your country, then we have the obligation to mix with their culture, with the way of eating... Because the way of eating is also culture" (P15, 20 years old).

Food culture works as a social code that provides templates of accepted behavior, and dominating it is crucial for social cohesion (Bardhi et al., 2010). Immigrants found means to learn this new code by Experimenting Different food, specifically the *Host food*.

Sometimes I eat with my friends here at the salon... 'Go eat a coxinha over there.' I eat coxinha. Sometimes, they teach me, 'This place has a good coxinha..' Because I don't know this food. Different for me. They teach me, my friends, 'This one has a really good coxinha. You can try it and eat his coxinha.' (P2, age 33)

While *Conformity* motivated the consumption of *Host food*, *Tradition* motivated the consumption of *Home food*. The consumption of *Global food* was also considered means to preserve *Traditions*, but informants stressed the significance of eating food from their home country. Previous research observed that immigrants often adopt assimilation strategies for their public life, while adopting separation strategies privately (Peñaloza, 1994). The same was observed in our study. We found that the consumption of *Home food* was primarily domestic and preferred in the presence of family members and peers, while *Host* was usually consumed in the presence of other social groups: "Not at home. At home, it's always Syrian food" (P11, age 36).

Preserving one's cultural identity can create a sense of unity and promote cooperation among members of an ethnic community (Danulyuk & Kurapov, 2017). Likely, prior research has observed that cooking *Home food* is a strategy to reinforce cultural ties. Likely, Schwartz (2012) stated that *Tradition* is motivated by social outcomes. It represents the shared values and beliefs of a group.

Members of a group internalize and replicate these social behaviors and beliefs, contributing to the ongoing reinforcement and transmission of cultural *Traditions*. This continuity is key to maintaining the group's cultural identity across generations. By reinforcing their Syrian identity, immigrants reinforce their sense of belonging to a larger social group, the Syrian people. By transferring cultural meaning to foods, immigrants find in Familiar foods a way to uphold and pass down cultural *Traditions* from generation to generation, as a participant's statement illustrate:

There's also the day of Saint Barbara... We make a well-cooked wheat dish with decorated chocolate and things to eat. This day is sacred for us and our food. You have to eat it! Whether you like it or not, you have to eat it! Even if it's not healthy... Culture is a very important part of food... Because the day is gone. It's gone. You can't go back again. You have to live in a certain way. You are also part of it. We are living this day because we are making the food. Also, culture was a meaningful part of that day. Because we like to feel the day. To feel memories. To pass them on to our future, to children, when we have them... Now I have nieces, we make... We always make the same thing for our nieces. She doesn't ask now because she's three years old, but later she will ask why we're making this. (P18, age 31)

According to the informants, the consumption of Familiar food is important to preserve *Tradition* because they have the power to bring back memories. Consistently, researchers state

that Familiar food can trigger vivid memories and intensify emotions associated with past experiences (Reid, et al., 2022).

Sometimes, you smell something, and it reminds you of many things, right? Here in Brazil, as I was walking down a street... I smelled something, and I remembered many things. These things... you cannot value with Money. We value with our hearts. It is connecting us with our culture, with our country. (P9, age 21)

4.2 Kin Care

A striking finding of our research is the strong influence that family has on the food choices of Syrian immigrants. The consumption of all three food categories was motivated by the instinct of caring for their relatives. Kin protection instincts evolved to enhance reproductive fitness by providing offspring with the best chance of survival (Ziker & Schnegg, 2005). In modern society, this biological mechanism is expressed through familial love and parental care (Aunger & Curtis, 2013). It facilitates nurturing behavior and motivates individuals to make sacrifices to help vulnerable or needy kin.

The interviews demonstrated that *Kin Care* was expressed through the basic value of *Benevolence*, which is also considered a social (value). Schwartz (2012. P.7) defines it as “preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact”. Correspondently, participants demonstrated a strong willingness to bear costs to provide benefits for their family members:

So his [father's] dream is for me to become an engineer. So, I'm trying to fulfill my dream and his dream. If I can't fulfill my dream, then I'll fulfill his dream. Because I have a lot of respect for my father. My father is everything. I have respect for my father and love for my mother. That's my life. [...] I only live because of my parents. My parents are everything in my life. They gave up everything for me to live. I'm happy like this" (P14, age 18)

While both *Benevolence* and *Conformity* values promote cooperative social relations, *Conformity* is often driven by the desire to avoid negative personal outcomes, whereas *Benevolence* is internally motivated (Schwartz, 2012). People who value *Benevolence* are likely to be more devoted to contributing to goals of family and friends (Lebedeva et al., 2019). Likely, participants informed that they needed money to support their families. Although money is the primary means for several ends in a capitalist society, helping the family was the primary goal for several participants. As an informant states: "Family is everything in Syria. I have only one daughter, so I do everything in my power to provide for her" (P17, 35 years old).

To gain financial capital, participants often preferred consuming nutritious food, as it gave them energy to manage daily obligations, like working and studying, what was considered essential for earning money. This is illustrated in the following statement:

Because I work a lot. So for me, I can keep the same... I don't have to sit down or sleep. [...] I can't just sit at home and ask my parents 'send me money' [...] I can't sleep in the park, you know? [...] Because if I don't work, I won't be able to pay my rent. If I don't work, I won't be able to buy my things. So, I have to work." (P6, age 24)

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The fluidity of consumer acculturation has been consistently observed. Immigrants swapping between acculturation strategies has often been attributed to contextual factors. Our research provides an evolutionary explanation for this phenomenon. Our study also suggests that immigrants negotiate values and perform strategies to deal with acculturation through food consumption based on cost-benefit analysis, often occurring unconsciously. Our findings suggest that acculturation strategies can be traced back to basic human needs, which is line with the concept of payoff bias suggested by Kunst & Mesoudi (2023)

In addition, our findings stress the crucial importance that collectivist values have in Syrian Culture (Ismaeli, 2020). Collectivist values tend to be transmitted through generations and are essential for the functioning of society (Dubrov & Tatarko, 2016). By negotiating between the consumption of foods, Syrian immigrants find ways to preserve their ties, while also forming new social bonding and caring for their families.

From a theoretical perspective, our work bridges gaps between consumer acculturation, evolutionary psychology, and universal values. It offers a new perspective to understand the fluidity of acculturation processes and can serve as a starting point for studies seeking to fill gaps between the cultural complexity of social studies and human nature.

Managers that operate in culturally diverse markets can benefit from understanding the fundamental motives that guide consumer behavior. By recognizing the motivations that drive consumer choices, marketers can tailor their strategies to appeal to those motives, thereby increasing the chances of success in those markets.

Finally, our study draws attention to a population that has been the victim the worst humanitarian crisis of the decade. We hope that our study can inform policies to meet immigrants' needs, improve their well-being and support them in their integration process.

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