

# Food Acculturation: A Typology of Professional Expatriates

**Raficka Hellal-Guendouzi**

EM Strasbourg Business School, University of Strasbourg

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# Food Acculturation: A Typology of Professional Expatriates

## ABSTRACT

This research focuses on food acculturation process of highly qualified professional expatriates and their families. Considering the multiple cultural influences that come into play in the process of food acculturation (host national and regional cultures and transnational cultures), it develops a typology of consumers. Our research highlights four expatriate profiles: (1) the “*Conservatives*”, (2) the “*Expats in their bubble*”, (3) the “*Integrated-Explorers*” and (4) the “*Integrated-Nostalgics*”. The profiles identified in our study provide for marketers a tool for segmentation of expatriates on acculturation criteria applied to the field of food purchases and consumption. The “*Conservatives*” and the “*Expats in their bubble*” deserve to be targeted differently from “*Integrated-Explorers*” and “*Integrated-Nostalgic*”.

*Keywords: Expatriates; Food acculturation; Consumer Typology.*

*Track: Consumer behaviour*

## Introduction

This research is part of the study of consumer behaviour and focuses more particularly on the food acculturation process of highly qualified professional expatriates and their families in the context of temporary expatriation. In particular, it analyses the link between “cultural identity” and food-related behaviour in a context of food acculturation. It is part of the field of consumer acculturation (Peñaloza, 1989; 1994) and more generally of research work that has focused on consumer ethnicity. In addition, it is positioned in the research stream of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) with its cultural approach to consumption. This current is particularly interested in the experiences of consumers and the socio-cultural meaning of consumption (Arnould, 1989; Belk, 1991). Our research work highlights the different identity positions adopted by expatriates during the food acculturation process. Our results allow to develop a typology of expatriate consumers in a situation of food acculturation. Understanding in depth the different purchasing and food consumption behaviours of highly mobile consumers represented by the category of professional expatriates who are exposed to multidimensional cultural influences in a context of acculturation will allow marketing practitioners to better target this population in terms of needs.

### 1. Background and Theoretical Framework

Psychological acculturation (Berry, 1990) refers to the changes that occur in the individual in terms of behaviour, attitudes or values. From this concept, marketing researchers have derived that of consumer acculturation, which refers to the process by which an individual from one culture learns the behaviours, knowledge and values associated with the consumption of another culture (Peñaloza, 1989). The majority of marketing work highlights “outcomes” derived from Berry's original acculturation model (1980;1990) and is confined to the binary influences of the host national culture and the culture of origin (Table 1).

Assimilation	Abandoning one's cultural identity to adopt the dominant culture
Marginalisation	Abandoning one's cultural identity without adopting and/or rejecting the dominant culture
Separation	Maintaining one's cultural identity without adopting the dominant culture
Integration	Maintaining one's cultural identity and adopting the dominant culture. Integration is the result of a compromise between

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maintaining one's culture of origin and acquiring the dominant culture.

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Table 1: The four acculturation strategies according to Berry's model (1980)

At the empirical level, a large majority of previous work that has looked at consumer acculturation has been confined to migrants from less developed countries who have come to settle permanently in countries with a higher standard of living to improve their material conditions (Lindridge, Hogg and Shah, 2004; Benabdallah and Jolibert, 2013). A few rare works have focused on the category of highly qualified professional expatriates temporarily expatriated in a country with an equivalent standard of living (Usunier, 1998; Gilly, 1995; Bundy and Cazes-Valette, 2013).

### *1.1 Cultural identity and food*

Specialists in the anthropology and sociology of food have shown that the choice of food products, cooking methods and food consumption are closely linked to “culture” (Fischler, 2008; Hubert, 2000, Poulain, 2002). In particular, they play an important role in a context of acculturation insofar as they are the mirror of cultural identity. More specifically, food consumption is an “instrument of identification” (Medina, 2001) which makes it possible to recreate the cultural identity of individuals within the framework of a migration. According to Hubert (2000), food anthropologist: “*Food habits are the last to disappear and food preferences are preserved longer than the mother tongue*”. Experts in the field also note a close link between food and the identity of migrants, emphasizing more particularly its persistent nature over time. In the field of marketing, few consumer behaviour studies have focused more specifically on the food acculturation of migrants (Chytkova, 2011; Usunier, 1998; Bundy and Cazes-Valette, 2013). This work has considered food preferences and the resulting purchasing and consumption behaviours as either the desire to maintain one's original identity, and/or the desire to adapt to the host culture. Therefore, food consumption represents a powerful and fruitful indicator for understanding the identity strategies of expatriate consumers in the context of migration.

### *1.2 Food acculturation*

Our research work fits more particularly into the work that has focused on ethnicity and “situational acculturation” (Stayman and Deshpande, 1989). The latter is based on the dynamic

and shifting nature of ethnic identity through the construction of multiple and hybrid identities among migrants in relation with consumption. The authors speak of “situational ethnicity” insofar as the individual creates multiple identities that he/she mobilizes according to contexts and relationships with others. Therefore, the individual as a consumer chooses an identity position according to the context in which he/she finds himself, leading to the adoption of specific purchasing and consumption behaviours. This research is thus fully in line with the post-assimilationist current of consumer acculturation, which considers that acculturation is rather "situational" insofar as the individual chooses an identity position according to the context in which he/she finds himself. They adapt their behaviour accordingly, leading to the adoption of multiple outcomes of acculturation or identity positions depending on the context of consumption or purchase (Oswald, 1999; Askegaard et al., 2005; Benabdallah and Jolibert, 2013). In the marketing literature, very few studies developed a typology of consumers in a situation of food acculturation. Among them, we can mention the work of Benabdallah and Jolibert (2013) that looked at the French context by focusing on Algerian immigrants. The authors integrated the influence of the subculture of origin in their analysis of the acculturation process of migrants. Their study thus made it possible to identify six consumer profiles: the “*pre-acculturated*”, the “*separated-social climber*”, the “*separated-nostalgic*”, the “*integrated*”, the “*cosmopolitan*” and the “*hyper-assimilated*”. Nevertheless, these rare works fail to consider in the process of acculturation third cultural forces beyond the traditional binary cultural influences of the culture of origin *versus* the host national culture. More recently, Dey et al. (2019) have identified four acculturation strategies « *rebellion* », « *rarefaction* », « *resonance* » et « *refrainment* » with migrants settled in London, considering the multicultural host environment beyond the influences of the host national culture. However, these rare studies have neglected the influence of the host regional subculture in favour of the influence of the host national culture. Also, these rare works do not integrate the effects of previous acculturations through the phenomenon of "multi-acculturation" (Figueiredo and Cayla, 2011) on food acculturation strategies and the identity positions that result from it during further acculturation. In addition, the work of Benabdallah et al. (2013) and Dey et al. (2019) do not highlight how the different food acculturation strategies adopted by migrants and the cultural identities displayed evolve over time, particularly according to the length of residence in the host cultural environment. Indeed, we can assume that depending on the duration of contact with members of another culture but also the exposure to food products from other cultures via the market, consumer profiles evolve over time, thus allowing to highlight the evolution of food behaviours according to the length of residence.

## 2. Methodology

This study focuses on the population of American, British and German highly qualified professional expatriates and their families temporarily settled in Alsace area in France. The choice of the field study is motivated by two main reasons. On the one hand, the area of Alsace is ranked third French region in terms of international presence (Adira Report, 2013). It also displays a high concentration of American, British and German subsidiaries favouring the presence of professional expatriates from these three nationalities. On the other hand, the field is characterized by the presence of a national culture and a regional subculture. It is also marked by a strong host multicultural environment with the presence of subcultures from the various settled communities (expatriates from other cultures, diplomats, migrants from historical successive waves of immigration and a more recent immigration for political and economic purposes). The phenomenon of acculturation is a complex and multidimensional concept (Arends-Tòth and Van de Vijver, 2006). Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen. We used the life story method centred on the narration of the different food habits of expatriates in contact with their new cultural environment. Life stories have the advantage of better *“understanding in depth the individual trajectories and the experience of people”* (Bah, Ndione, Tiercelin, 2015). We have developed a narrative frame articulated around two main questions. First of all, a first general question focused on the different life experiences and contacts with individuals from different cultures. Then, a second question based on the different eating behaviours before and during the different expatriations.

We conducted 25 interviews with 16 professional expatriate households during the period from 2017 to 2018 lasting between 40 and 100 minutes. We included partners and teenagers in our sample in order to increase internal validity by cross-checking the statements of different members of the same family. The interviews were recorded and we transcribed carefully the whole life stories for analysis. In addition, we ensured that the sample of interviewees was as diverse as possible by varying age, gender, family situation, length of residence in France, previous experiences of expatriation and past acculturation. The analysis was carried out manually and then assisted by Nvivo 10 software. On the one hand, it focuses on analysing the different changes in the eating behaviour of expatriates according to the various cultural influences that we have identified. On the other hand, it analyses how expatriates display their cultural identities through food behaviours. To do this, we selected a thematic content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The analysis was organized in two levels. First, a structural analysis allowed us to identify individual and family trajectories of

consumption and to identify the breaking points and the events that contributed to changes in eating habits over time and geographical mobility. Then, in a second step, we analysed the different changes in eating behaviours using different functional categories in order to consider different perspectives in the analysis (consumption context, cultural influences that come into play).

### 3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the life stories based on individual and family consumption trajectories of the 16 expatriate households allowed us to identify four identity outcomes. It leads to the development of a typology of expatriate consumers (Figure 1) derived from Berry's model (1980) that we have revisited.

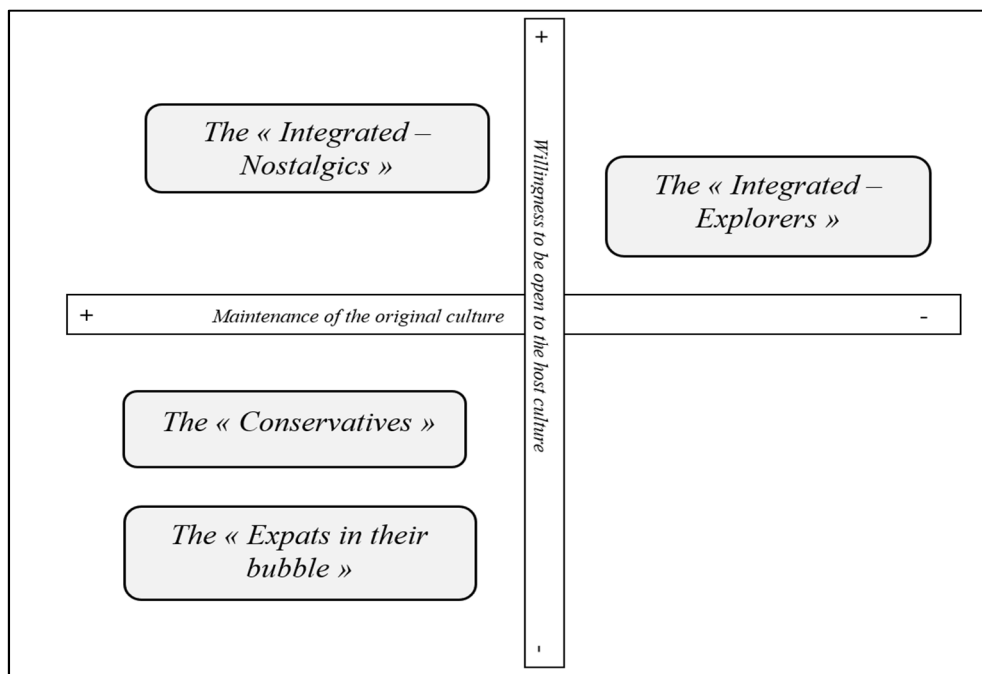


Figure 1: Typology of expatriate consumers

#### 3.1 The “Conservatives”

These expatriates are still very attached to their cultural identity, which they perpetuate within their homes in the host country. Thus, they maintain a large part of the eating habits of their culture of origin during the expatriation stay in France. These behaviours are displayed more particularly in the private sphere in the presence of children. Nevertheless, the opening towards the new food practices of the host culture is present and is done gradually over time. These expatriates are first and foremost attracted by the eating habits of the host regional

subculture (Alsatian culture) which they perceive as closer to those of their culture of origin in comparison to those of the host national culture which seems to them more exotic and refined. Thus, the adoption of food habits of the host national culture essentially manifests itself outside the home, particularly during lunch taken outside in the company with French work colleagues or during business meals.

### *3.2 The “Expats in their Bubble”*

These people meet regularly with fellow citizens around a drink or a table with typical dishes from their country of origin. They often attend social activities organized by local associations of expatriates. These expatriates thus tend to consume emblematic dishes of their culture of origin during the celebration of cultural or religious events. When the opportunity arises, some expatriates do not hesitate to put on their most beautiful traditional outfits ostentatiously displaying their cultural identity. On this special occasion, they meet up with fellow citizens in the host country to enjoy together around grilled meats, traditional cakes and drinks. Furthermore, adopting the eating habits of the host national culture is more associated with prestige and gustatory pleasure. There is a strong hedonic dimension to consuming refined French dishes outside the home, eating in gourmet restaurants with good French wine. These expatriates also like introducing their fellow citizens to French gastronomy.

### *3.3 The “Integrated - Explorers”*

During their stay in France, these expatriates adopt very quickly the new French habits and they are keen on French food. They perceive the eating habits of the host Alsatian subculture as old-fashioned and more widely support the new eating habits of the host national culture perceived as more « exotic », tasty and refined. In addition, they are very fond of ethnic cuisines in relation with their cosmopolitan profile. These people do not define themselves on the basis of their original cultural identity, but through an identity which has been shaped during their previous travels, intercultural encounters and past acculturation experiences. These expatriates define themselves above all as citizens of the world who refuse to attribute some of their eating habits to a particular culture or country. These expatriates are also keen on eating and preparing foods of host subcultures from immigration like North African or Turkish dishes.

### *3.4 The “Integrated – Nostalgic”*

These expatriates have largely adopted French eating habits and are fully integrated into the host society. They do not hesitate to display in public in front of their loved ones (friends,



family, colleagues) their full mastery of table rituals and their knowledge of the French cuisine that they love. When fellow citizens visit them in France, they introduce their guests to the national cuisine of the host country and show themselves to be fine connoisseurs of French eating habits. However, they sometimes feel a strong sense of nostalgia which often reminds them of their cultural origins or even their sweet childhood in the country and triggers the consumption of dishes from the country of origin which bring comfort.

#### **4. Conclusions and Implications for Theory and Practice**

Our study highlights different profiles of expatriates in a situation of food acculturation. Based on individual and family consumption trajectories, our results have thus made it possible to develop the first typology of high skilled expatriate consumers in a context of food acculturation, considering third-party cultural influences, in particular the host subcultures (regional and from historical waves of immigration) and the cultural influences from previous experiences of acculturation. Our work thus extends that of Dey et al. (2019) taking into account broader cultural influences that come into play in the process of acculturation. In addition, our results show how the profiles of expatriates in a food acculturation situation are not frozen in time and how expatriates move from one profile to another during their stay in the host country. Thus, “*Conservative*” expatriates see their eating habits evolve over the years of residence in France and become “*Integrated-Nostalgic*” expatriates. Some “*Conservative*” expatriates develop gradually their cultural experiences and contacts with people of the host country but also through more intensive travels with the corollary of their eating habits evolving towards that of “*Integrated-Explorer*” expatriates. Their original cultural identity is no longer meaningfully reflected in their eating behaviours. It changed over time, shaped by new experiences of cultural and food contacts.

The profiles identified in our study provide for marketers a tool for segmentation of expatriates on acculturation criteria applied to the field of food purchases and consumption. Thus, expatriates still strongly attached to the eating habits of their culture of origin, in particular the “*Conservatives*” (36% of interviewees) and the “*Expats in their bubble*” (8% of interviewees) deserve to be targeted differently from “*Integrated-Explorers*” (28% of expatriates) and “*Integrated-Nostalgics*” (28% of expatriates). Indeed, the “*Conservatives*” and the “*Expats in their bubble*” are very attached to food products and the flavours of the cuisine from their country of origin and even more particularly at specific time of the year (religious

and cultural celebrations, winter period) with the need to consume some comfort food from home country. A particular attention during these key periods would make it possible to optimize advertising campaigns for food products aimed at this population.

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