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Values, Vanity and Young Women: An Investigation into Food Purchasing Behaviour

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Abstract

Although a large and growing proportion of the Australian economy is devoted to the manufacture and retailing of food products, little research has been conducted into the influence of personal values and vanity on the food purchasing behaviour of young women. The research design for this study involved initially a qualitative phase and then the results were used to design a subsequent quantitative phase to investigate the importance of these factors on the food purchasing behaviour of 18 to 30 year old females. The study found that personal values, vanity, physical health, perceived body image and various marketing activities were major factors of influence in the purchasing and consumption process of this age group of Australian women.

Introduction

The aim of this study was to determine whether personal values and vanity influence the food purchasing behaviour of young women and to identify the influence of marketing on their food purchasing decisions. According to Rozin (2000) very little is known about why consumers choose one food over another or about the influence of issues such as physical appearance in the food consumption process.

Physical appearance is linked to body image which is described as '... the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves' (Thompson, 1993 p.52). Lightstone (1999) explains that body image is psychological in nature involving perception, imagination, emotions and physical sensations. Noting a trend in popular women's magazines towards the increasing slenderness of models as well as an increase in articles and advertisements addressing dietary issues, Thompson (1997) concludes that this trend has provided women with the ideal body image goal. Thompson also asserts that 'the popularity of television, movies, and magazines allows the media to be among the most influential and efficacious communicators of the thin ideal' (1997, p.37). Body image is also influenced by 'what we see in the mirror, feedback from others, socio-cultural values, "self talk" and mental pictures' (Goward, 1993, p.3).

A value is a centrally held enduring belief that guides actions and judgments across specific situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end states of existence (Kamakura and Mazzon 1991). According to Vinson, Scott, and Lamont (1977) values are responsible for the selection and maintenance of the ends or goals toward which individuals strive.

In the context of this study, Getley (1995) asserts that people will make choices about food depending on their own personal values. For example, if they value the nutritional content of food, they will make particular choices which will reflect this value. Moreover, Rokeach (1968) reports that various combinations of values significantly differentiate individuals. Personal values, therefore, have a major influence on peoples' lifestyle, interests, outlook and consumption priorities and, therefore, were important in this study. The "List of Values" (LOV) scale developed by Kahle (1983) was used to measure their effect.

In terms of vanity, Netemeyer, Burton and Lichtenstein (1995) assert that vanity has four trait aspects namely: an excessive concern for physical appearance, a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of one's physical appearance, an excessive concern for personal achievements, and a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of one's personal achievements. The "Vanity Scale" which they developed was also incorporated into this study.

Methodology

Following a review of literature, the study employed what Tashakkori and Teddlie (1989) refer to as a "sequential mixed method design" which involved conducting a qualitative phase and using these results to design a subsequent quantitative phase of the study.

In the qualitative phase a convenience sample of 50 female respondents were interviewed and the themes and topics that emerged were added to the dimensions identified in the review of literature to develop a questionnaire comprised of 72 questions. This was presented as a semantic differential scale on which respondents rated each question from 1-7, where 1 represented 'not important' and 7 represented 'extremely important'. When the LOV scale developed by Kahle (1983) and Netemeyer *et al's* (1995) vanity scale were added to the questionnaire, together with a number of classificatory and demographic questions, there were 153 questions in total.

This was distributed to a non-probability, convenience sample of 500 female respondents. This survey achieved 488 valid responses from a representative age and occupation cohort. Respondents comprised of 249 (51%) ranging in age from 18 to less than 25 years old and 239 (49%) ranging from 25 to 30 years old. Respondents were almost equally divided between students (49.6%) and non-students (50.4%), while 40.2% were in fulltime employment, 37.3% employed part-time and the remaining 20.5% not employed or were students.

Results

A Principal Component Analysis was undertaken with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett's test of sphericity indicated the appropriateness of this method for the data. The analysis

extracted eight factors with eigen values greater than one, which accounted for 66.7% of the variance after six iterations.

Factor 1, Physical appearance, was the predominant factor accounting for 24% of the variance. The dominance of the physical appearance factor and the variables that it is comprised of, highlight the importance of physical considerations for this group. These variables could be subdivided into two categories and related to either the consumption or avoidance of particular food products. The eight factors, and the variables (with factor loadings) were:

1. Physical appearance: Improve physical appearance (.84), help lose weight (.84), effect on body shape (.83), avoid high fat (.82), effect on physical shape (.817), maintain physical shape (.80), diet when has wrong foods (.77), fear of weight gain (.77), exercise to compensate for wrong foods (.76), calorie conscious (.75) avoid high carbohydrates (.70), think about health benefits (.70), low in cholesterol (.66).

2. Time: Faster meal (.87), save time (.83), minimum preparation time (.73), convenient location (.73), speedy service (.65),

3. Marketing: Advertising (.85), brand (.83), packaging (.78), label (.72),

4. Price: Price (.86), saving money (.86), value for money (.78).

5. Food Quality: Taste (.82), quality (.79), enjoyment (.68)

6. Culture: Religious reasons (.82) ethical and philosophical reasons (.73), cultural background (.67).

7. Environment: Environmental protection (.85), avoid animals suffering (.80).

8. Filling Food: Fill me up (.88), satisfying (.86).

The influence of values, as operationalised through the LOV scale and physical concerns operationalised in the Vanity scale were found to be significantly linked to body shape. The scores on the variables associated with the LOV scale also revealed an association with physical appearance.

The value of belonging was significantly related to the variables of the physical appearance and body shape factor. These were; to improve physical appearance, effect on body shape, avoid high fat, maintain physical shape, exercise to compensate for wrong foods, avoid high carbohydrates, think about health benefits, low in cholesterol.

Table 1 List of Values (Security, Belonging, Fun & enjoyment, and Well-respected), Vanity and Marketing

Variable	Security	Belonging	Fun	Well-respected	Marketing	Vanity
Improve physical appearance	X	X		X	X	X
Help lose weight	X			X	X	X
Effect on body shape	X	X	X	X	X	X
Avoid high fat		X	X	X	X	X
Effect on physical shape			X	X	X	X
Maintain physical shape	X	X	X	X	X	X
Diet when had wrong foods				X	X	X
Fear of weight gain	X			X	X	X
Exercise to compensate for wrong foods		X		X	X	
Calorie conscious					X	X
Avoid high carbohydrates	X	X		X	X	X
Think about health benefits		X	X	X	X	X
Low in cholesterol	X	X			X	X
'X' Identifies significant differences observed at the .05 level using ANOVA						

The 'fun and enjoyment' value was also significantly related to the variables of the physical appearance and body shape factor relating to effect of food on body shape. These were: avoid high fat, effect on physical shape, maintain physical shape, and think about health benefits.

The 'well respected' value was also significantly related to the variables of the physical appearance and body shape factor relating to effect on body shape. These were; to improve physical appearance, help lose weight, effect on body shape, avoid high fat, effect on physical shape, maintain physical shape, diet when had wrong foods, fear of weight gain, exercise to compensate for wrong foods, avoid high carbohydrates, think about health benefits.

It was also found that 'vanity' was significantly related to the variables of the physical appearance and body shape factor. These were; improve physical appearance, help lose weight, effect on body shape, avoid high fat, effect on physical shape, maintain physical shape, diet when had wrong foods, fear of weight gain, calorie conscious, avoid high carbohydrates and low in cholesterol.

Respondents were also asked to rate the influence of a variety of marketing factors in their food choice. These included brand, advertising, packaging and labeling. The responses to the questions from the marketing variables were summed and recoded. Those that were more strongly influenced by marketing also scored significantly higher on the following variables of the physical appearance and body shape factor; improve physical appearance, help lose weight, effect on body shape, avoid high fat, effect on physical shape, maintain physical shape, diet when had wrong foods, fear of weight gain, exercise to compensate for wrong foods, calorie conscious, avoid high carbohydrates, think about health benefits and low in cholesterol.

Conclusions and implications

The results of this study reveal that personal values and vanity have the potential to influence food-purchasing behaviour. Personal values relating to security, belonging, fun and being well respected, were claimed to be especially influential. The results suggest that this group of women seeks healthier eating alternatives and products that are low in fat, low in carbohydrate and low in calories. There is evidence (from the wider literature, not in the present study) that this trend is driven by media influences and the body shape ideals portrayed within magazines, movies and TV.

The study has shown that marketing is also influential. It is concluded that emphasising the nutritional content and health benefits of food products is likely to strike a chord with 18-30 year old Australian women. It is also suggested that an application of this finding, for those who retail food products, is that they need to have a comprehensive marketing strategy, linked with appropriate advertising campaigns, that specifically target young women. Further, to take into account the apparent trend for eating of more meals prepared 'outside of the home', it is suggested that the hospitality industry, especially cafes and restaurants, should investigate the likely impact of providing advice on the nutritional content of menu dishes for this group.

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