

The Influence of Socio-cultural Variables on Consumers' Perception of Halal Food Products: A Case of Masvingo Urban, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of socio-cultural variables on consumers' perception on halal food products (food prepared according to Islamic dietary laws). We assume that a number of socio-cultural factors affect consumers' purchase of food products especially education, religion, occupation and social stratification. As the Halal principles are taken from the Syariah law (Law of Islam), how do consumers in Masvingo, Zimbabwe view the food products that are prepared under Islamic dietary laws? This study was rekindled by the contention that Zimbabwe is largely a Christian country and may prefer to be guided by Christian values founded on Biblical laws. We had four hypotheses which were tested using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The results revealed that indeed socio-cultural factors have little or no influence on an individual consumer's perception on consumption of halal certified food products. However, it was found out that the Islamic consumers and other religious groups other than protestant, catholic, baptist and apostolic are highly sensitive to their socio-cultural orientations.

Keywords: socio-culture, culture, subculture, religion, halal, consumer perception

1. Introduction

The Zimbabwean culture is likened to a bowl of salads as it is adorned by individuals and groups of people with diverse and largely dynamic backgrounds. It is this dynamism in culture that is fast driving and reshaping consumer perceptions on consumption habits. Food preference has since time immemorial been directly influenced by the religious orientation of people and such has been the case with Halal foods. The Moslem culture is part of a large macro-culture that has drastically changed the manner in which food has been considered as permissible or unacceptable for consumption. Thus marketers, especially for convenient food products are fast embracing this emerging cultural force by becoming Halal sensitive. The question which will then arise is: Is Zimbabwe, a predominantly Christian nation being easily dragged into unconditionally accepting and appreciating the Moslem dietary guidelines, considering that the Moslems constitute only 3% of the Zimbabwean population, a very meagre representation compared to a 70% (seventy percent) for Christians and the balance practise traditional African religions (<http://churchmousec.wordpress>)?

It is a common practice for most countries to have a regulatory framework regarding the necessary standards to be observed and implemented by the food industries in processing their food products. However, though Zimbabwe does not have clear cut guidelines, it is still imperative for it to follow and align itself to international standards so that it can effectively cater for the diverse needs of the local and international markets. The emergence of Islamic dietary laws in Zimbabwe arose as a result of the need for organisations like Cold Storage Commission (CSC) to engage into exportation of its beef products to Islamic countries. While this move yielded positive results for the company, it sparked furore among the predominantly Christian Zimbabwean population. This outcry led the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) in 1997 to mediate and mandate that all meat be labelled halal and non-halal but this did not augur well with the Zimbabwe Council of Islamic Scholars (ZCIS) who threatened to withdraw their licences from CSC if it were to operate both halal and non-halal abattoirs.

Regardless of all the foregoing events the Halal practices have slowly infiltrated the entire food market, as evidenced by many big companies who have gone halal by implementing the Islamic guidelines of food preparation. Amongst these players that have embraced this practice include: Suncrest, Irvines, KFC, Chicken Inn, Nandos, Food Express, and Unilever. Therefore this paper seeks to investigate the impact of socio-cultural

variables on the consumers' perception on halal food products.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Socio-culture

According to Murphy (1985) as quoted by Page and Connell (2009) it is difficult to separate the two terms social and cultural elements hence the term socio-cultural tends to be used frequently in literature. Socio-culture entails social and cultural factors that influence the buying behaviour of consumers and are inclusive of culture, religion, language, social class, reference group, family, demographics (age, sex, education, occupation, income and marital status) and geography (Schiffman, Kanuk and Hansen, 2008). In analysing the social-cultural context of business that impact on consumer perception of halal it is essential to recognize that societies and cultures are not homogeneous and/or fixed although a change in one heavily affects the other (www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/wetherly_otter/). Thus people in a society with similar social statuses, occupation, education and religious orientation are bound to have beliefs, norms, values and behaviours that portray uniformity. It is against this background of inseparability between society and culture that the researchers decided to focus on how the following key socio-cultural variables influence consumers' perception on the consumption of halal food products.

2.2 Culture

Culture has, is and will play a significant role in the way consumers behave towards food products in any given market. Thus it can influence consumers to buy or not to buy certain food products as it sets acceptable standards. Many researchers and anthropologists have coined the various definitions of culture as exemplified by Kottak (2009) and Hofstede (1980) who view culture as a collective programming of the mindset of a specific group of people which differentiates it from another group of people. These differences are defined through knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, customs and any other material variables. However, Blackwell et al (2006) refer to culture "... as a set of values, ideas, artefacts and other meaningful symbols that help individuals communicate, interpret and evaluate as members of society. Thus culture is viewed as a blue print or basis for human activity, shaping the coordinates of social action and productivity." In a similar definition culture is regarded as a set of acquired behaviour patterns transmitted symbolically through language and other means to members of a particular society. However Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) view culture as being built on three significant pillars: beliefs, values and customs. They believe that these variables are key to influencing the consumer behaviour of a particular society. Beliefs are essentially dominant influences on an individual's assessment of a brand to purchase. Values are believed to derive their being from the belief system and are usually enduring and difficult to change. Customs are overt modes of behaviour that constitute culturally approved or acceptable ways of behaving in specific situations (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2010).

Considering that societies are complex and multidimensional, it is difficult to give an unambiguous definition of the term culture (Baugardener, 2009). Therefore from this perspective culture may generally be referred to as "...the social roles, norms and values and practices that are universally acceptable and shared by a social group and/or society and are transmitted across generations". Thus in a macro or national culture differences may be apparent for both large and small groups of people. Commonalities in national heritage, language, ethnicity, race, age, gender, geographic location and historical events are among many variables that impact on cultural diversity among many nations. Even within a nation like Zimbabwe the above highlighted factors may contribute to local and regional variations in culture resulting in scenarios where cultures are produced within cultures.

According to Schiffman, Kanuk, and Hansen (2008) anthropologists have identified three distinct forms of cultural learning viz, formal learning in which adults and older siblings teach young family members how to behave, informal learning which entails that a child learns primarily by imitating behaviour of selected adults such as family, friends, television heroes and technically through direct contact with teachers in a classroom environment, where they are taught what should be done, the manner in which it should be done and above all the reasons for which it should be done. Culture may also be learnt through acculturation, a phenomenon which engages people into learning or acquiring new or foreign culture. The learning process has a significant bearing on an individual consumers' perception about a specific food stimulus regardless of their genes or physical appearance. True culture is one that is manifested through sharing. Culture has evolved overtime and is still evolving and this dynamism has created challenges for the marketing of food products. This is necessitated by the changes in tastes and preferences, technology, changing values and customs borrowed from other cultures.

2.3 Subcultures

Members of a particular subculture have similar beliefs, values, customs and norms that distinguish them from

other member of the same society. However, these adhere also to the mainstream cultural beliefs, values and behavioural pattern of the larger society. Schiffman et al (2008) view subculture as a separate cultural group that exists as an autonomous and identifiable segment within a larger more complex society. A subculture is characterised by the unique beliefs, values, and customs subscribed to by members of a specific subculture yet the core cultural themes are normally shared by most of the population regardless of specific subculture memberships.

2.4 Social class

The concept of social class is used to assign individuals or members of a family to a social class category. Kotler and Armstrong (2010) define social class as a relatively permanent homogenous socio-economic division or group in society with people sharing similar values, social statuses, lifestyles, income levels, interests and behaviour. Social stratification is dependent on a number of demographic variables such as occupation, income, education among others. In another definition Schiffman et al (2008) consider social class as the categorisation of the members of society into a hierarchy of distinct status classes, such that members of the same class have similar status and that members belonging to other classes have either more or less status. Empirical research has often shown that to a greater extent persons belonging to the same social class exhibit common values, attitudes, beliefs and buying behaviour although they may have different perceptions.

2.5 Education

Education allows individuals to develop knowledge, skills and beliefs with regards to the food choices and at the same time creates restrictions on the consumption of certain food products (Colnan, 1990). Education is a socio-cultural imperative which can be acquired formally or informally. Formally, education may be acquired through learning, training and experience. Education can also be acquired incidentally, that is it can be acquired by accident or without much effort through interaction with family members, friends, peers, living in different countries and contact with different people. From a marketing perspective consumer education is acquired through advertising and direct contact with the brand. It may also come into being as consumers get exposure to different cultures during their travel where culture transfer takes place. This socio-cultural variable has a significant bearing on consumer's perception with regards to the purchase of certain food products.

2.6 Occupation

It is defined by unequal access to desirable resources (money, services and goods) or personal gratification such as prestige or respect. Weber argued that social class is defined by differentiated wealth, political power and an individual status and these are believed to exert different attitudes towards the consumption of certain food products (Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture, 2003). Occupation is a key determinant of an individual consumer's income. Occupation not only represents prestige but also structures time and constraints the attention that can be given to food. Occupation-generated hours and lifestyle choices affect what is eaten as well as where and with whom food is eaten.

2.7 Religion

The word religion is derived from a Latin word "religare" which signifies "to tie or to bind." Wallace, A. F. C. as quoted by Kottak (2009) defines religion as a belief or ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers and forces. Religiosity is the degree to which an individual is committed to his/her religion (Mokhlis, 2006), thus it has a bearing on an individual consumer's perception and ultimate behaviour towards food. Delener, (1994) and Pettinger, (2004) also confirm that an individual consumer's purchase behaviour is determined by his/her religious affiliation which governs what a consumer is allowed to consume or viceversa. The Zimbabwean culture is dominated by a Christian religion and other minority religions. The Islamic religion is not consistent with Christianity as it does not recognise and accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God and does not believe in the use of the Holy Bible, which is the Word of God. Secondly, Islam requires obedience based on the detailed laws and regulations enshrined in the Quran and yet Christianity is believed as a free gift that came into being as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians view the acceptance of Halal practices as submitting to the Islamic Syari'a and to Allah. This explains why Zimbabwean Christians in 1996 did not easily yield to Halal practices as it was viewed as a way to press their religious ideology through the provision of halal meat.

2.8 Halal

Halal food products have recently dominated the world market as standards for safety and best quality. This is evidenced by the proliferation of halal certified products found on most shelves of both muslim and non-muslim countries. In most cases acceptance of halal food practices is largely due to the wholesomeness of the halal

concept, but in Zimbabwe it was due to the need to enter into the Arabian beef market. However the practice has slowly permeated into the local market due to indiscriminate importation of food products from other Southern African Countries such as South Africa as a result of an economic crisis that besieged Zimbabwe a few years ago. Halal is commonly used to refer the muslim dietary guidelines that stipulate what is permissible or allowed for human consumption. It is an all encompassing term that governs all forms of behaviour, be it political, social or economic (www.strictlyhalal.com). Golnaz et al (2010) stress that the halal concept emphasises safety, hygiene and wholesomeness which creates an excellent platform for healthy and safety of food. Wahab (2004) defines Halal as a general term which means permitted, allowed, authorized, approved, sanctioned, lawful, legal, legitimate or licit. The word 'Food for Muslims' or 'Food certified Halal' or having similar meanings can be defined as follows: anything not contaminated or made in part by substances derived from animals which are not allowed to be consumed by the Muslims or not containing substances which are declared as filth to Islamic laws. During preparation, the food should not be processed by the use of equipment deemed filth by the law. The main source of the Islamic Law is Al-Quran and all rules are also Allah's Law. This is opposed to Christianity where all rules are taken from the Holy Bible which is God's Law (Wahab, 2004). The fundamental difference between the two religions is their beliefs in Allah (for Muslims) or God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (for Christians).

2.9 Consumer Perception

There are several definitions of consumer perception some which have a biological perspective and others have a consumer behaviour orientation. Biological definitions only concentrate on the use of an individual's sense organs (eye, ear, skin, nose and tongue). The consumer behaviour perspective goes beyond as it also encompasses the individual's understanding of the environment to fit his/her situation. From a consumer behaviour perspective Schiffman et al (2008) define perception as a process by which an individual selects, organises, and interprets sensory stimuli to get a better understanding of the world. This psychological variable poses challenges in that two or more individuals subjected to the same stimuli may have varying deductions that seek to satisfy an individual's personal needs, beliefs and expectations. In the same vein individuals may have the same socio-cultural orientations but their interpretation of stimuli (halal food products) may be different.

3. Research Hypotheses

Socio-culture is a fundamental phenomenon which manifests itself through a variety of variables such as values, norms, beliefs, artefacts, religion, education, social stratification, occupation, behaviour and traditions. In this particular study our main focus was on how education, religion, occupation and social stratification impact on the individual consumers' perception on the consumption of the halal food products.

Education is one of the socio-cultural factors that have a fundamental influence on an individual consumer's choice of food (Hupkens, Knibbe & Drop, 2000). The rationale behind this statement is founded on the contention that education opens a variety of avenues to food access. In addition to that the social diffusion theory assumes that consumers who are highly educated are generally more innovative and as such take up new innovations faster than less educated consumers (Rogers, 1995). In light of the above we coin our first hypothesis:

H1: The level of education of an individual consumer is positively related to his/her perception of halal food products.

Religion has a strong bearing on consumer behaviour and behaviour in general, especially in decisions to purchase food related products (Delener, 1994 and Pettinger, 2004). According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2010), an individual's decision to buy is dependent on his/her religious background, thus religion determines the pattern of food consumption and therefore may restrict the consumption of certain types of foods. For instance Jews are prohibited from eating pork, Hindus from eating beef while Christians are expected to refrain from eating certain meat products as quoted in Deuteronomy 14: 3-8.

"³Do not eat any detestable thing. ⁴These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, ⁵the deer, the gazelle, the roe deer, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep.^a ⁶You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews the cud. ⁷However, of those that chew the cud or that have a split hoof completely divided you may not eat the camel, the rabbit or the coney. ^b Although they chew the cud, they do not have a split hoof; they are ceremonially unclean for you. ⁸The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses."

From the ongoing discussions it is evident that religiosity may influence various aspects of the choice behaviour of affiliate members by the rules and taboos it inspires (Terpestra and David, 1991). Hence our second

hypothesis is:

H2: An individual consumer's religion has a positive relationship with his/her perception about halal food products.

Occupation provides status and income and above all, the type of work one does and the kind of individuals' one works with over a relatively long period of time directly impact on one's values and lifestyles and all aspects related to the consumption process (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). Studies in the American market have shown that there are differences in consumption between occupational classes for such products as detergents, beer, food, shampoo, and paper towels. In the same vein job incumbents who occupy different positions have the propensity to have varying perception on consumption of certain food products. Therefore our third hypothesis is:

H3: There is a positive correlation between occupation and an individual's perception on consumption of halal food products.

According to Assael (1995), social class status is likely to indicate common values and similar purchasing patterns. Studies have shown that individuals in the upper middle class emphasise on education, are fashion oriented and are less likely to be brand loyal as compared to other groups. Similarities in norms, values and purchasing patterns per social stratum therefore serve as a frame of reference for consumer purchase behaviour and perception of certain food products. It is against this background that we postulate our fourth hypothesis that:

H4: There is a positive correlation between a social class category and the individual's perception on consumption of halal food products.

4. Methodology

The research employed a descriptive survey research design as it afforded the researchers the privilege to establish the existing relationship between socio-cultural variables and individual consumers' perceptions of halal food products. This research adopted a two-pronged approach to sampling. Research subjects were entirely chosen on the basis of the researchers' convenience and personal judgement since most individuals we interviewed in shopping malls are potential consumers of halal and/or non halal foods. The sample constituted 80 people (45 females and 35 males). These were drawn from shopping malls around Masvingo urban.

We based our research on one set of structured questionnaire which was divided into four socio-cultural constituent parts namely education, religion, occupation and social stratification. The questionnaires were personally administered by researchers. We also employed the five point Likert scale where respondents were asked to rate each identified socio-cultural variables' influence on an individual consumer's perception of halal food products. Pretesting of the questionnaire was done with 8 people (which constituted 10 percent of the sample population) at Chesvingo and Yeukai shopping malls. This gave the researchers an opportunity to fine-tune the wording of the questions.

For the simple rationale that the research sought to establish the relationship between socio-cultural variables and perception of halal foods, Spearman's rank correlation was adopted as it best measures the strength of a relationship between two variables in which one would have an effect on the other. The model is presented below:

$$r = 1 - \frac{6 \sum d^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

Where: d = difference in ranks; n = number of observations

5. Research Results

The table below shows a summary of findings on how educational level correlates with the individual's perception on consumption of halal food products.

Table 1. Impact of education on the perception of halal food products

Education	Mean (X)	Rx	Mean (Y)	Ry	Rx-Ry (D)	D ²
'O' level and under	0.23	4.00	3.10	3.00	1.00	1.00
'A' level	0.10	2.00	3.60	5.00	(3.00)	9.00
Diploma	0.13	3.00	2.60	2.00	1.00	1.00

First Degree	0.48	5.00	3.30	4.00	1.00	1.00
Post Graduate Degree	0.08	1.00	2.30	1.00	0.00	0.00
Total						12.00
r						0.40

This analysis is based on our first hypothesis which asserts that there is a positive relationship between an individual's level of education and his/her perception of halal food products. This hypothesis was tested using Spearman's rank correlation. The results of r are 0.4 depicting a weak positive relationship between the level of education and perception of halal foods. The fact that the relationship is weak demonstrates that education is not a key socio-cultural variable in influencing individual's choice and consumption of halal foods. This could be attributed to the fact that education exposes people to various cultural backgrounds and a striking phenomenon has been the rise of people going to Asian countries and South Africa to acquire education and work in various industries thereby getting acculturated. In these countries they consume halal food products and as they return home they share their experiences and may introduce these food products to their families.

The table below depicts the summary of findings on how religion correlates with an individual consumer's perception of halal food products.

Table 2. Impact of religion on perception of halal food products

Religion	Mean (X)	Rx	Mean (Y)	Ry	Rx-Ry (D)	D ²
Protestant	0.21	5.00	3.60	4.00	1.00	1.00
Catholic	0.19	4.00	2.50	1.00	3.00	9.00
Baptist	0.08	2.00	3.50	3.00	(1.00)	1.00
Apostolic	0.34	6.00	3.30	2.00	4.00	16.00
Islam	0.05	1.00	3.80	5.50	(4.50)	20.25
Others	0.14	3.00	3.80	5.50	(2.50)	6.25
Total						53.50
r						(0.50)

The second hypothesis asserts that there is a positive correlation between religion and an individual consumer's perception on consumption of halal food products. A negative relationship was found between an individual consumer's religion and perception on consumption of halal food products with r being -0.50. This demonstrates that in general religion does not have a bearing on an individual's perception on consumption of halal food products. However it was noted that Islam and other religions are highly sensitive to the consumption of halal food products as their religions strictly prescribe to their followers what is permissible or not. The responses from Catholics had the least mean value (2.50) an aspect which demonstrates that they are not sensitive to the prescription of the Christian Bible as prescribed in Deuteronomy 14:3-8, they have relaxed these biblical laws. Despite the fact that all Christians alike read the bible there have been diverse opinions when it comes to consumers' food preference and choices.

The table below reflects a summary of findings on how occupation correlates with an individual consumer's perception of halal food products.

Table 3. Impact of occupation on perception of halal food products

Occupation	Mean (X)	Rx	Mean (Y)	Ry	Rx-Ry (D)	D ²
Civil servants	0.26	4.00	2.70	4.00	0.00	0.00
Self employed	0.13	3.00	2.50	3.00	0.00	0.00
Cross border	0.06	1.00	1.80	1.00	0.00	0.00
Private sector	0.10	2.00	3.30	5.00	(3.00)	9.00
Others	0.45	5.00	2.30	2.00	3.00	9.00
Total						18.00
r						0.1

Hypothesis three asserts that there is a positive relationship between occupation and an individual's perception on consumption of halal food products. The findings reveal that there is a very weak relationship between occupation and an individual consumer's perception on consumption of halal food products as depicted by $r = 0.10$. This could be explained by the fact that during the era of economic meltdown in Zimbabwe most of the unemployed people crossed to South Africa and other overseas countries where the consumption of halal food products has become a tradition. These would then remit groceries most of which are halal certified. The bulk of the informal traders would also import halal certified food products for trading and this is what has also contributed to the wide spread consumption of halal food products. The proliferation of halal food products was also evident in major retail shops (such as Spar, Tsungai, OK Zimbabwe, TM etc) and in Food Retail Chain Groups (such as Chicken Inn and Food Express). It is against this background that indeed consumers' sensitivity to consumption of halal food products has been compromised.

The table below shows the correlation between social class and an individual's perception on consumption of halal food products.

Table 4. Impact of social stratification on perception of halal food products

Social Stratification	Mean (X)	Rx	Mean (Y)	Ry	Rx-Ry (D)	D ²
Upper class	0.08	1.00	3.50	4.50	(3.50)	12.25
Upper middle	0.23	4.00	3.50	4.50	(0.50)	0.25
Lower Middle	0.36	5.00	2.70	2.00	3.00	9.00
Upper lower	0.15	2.00	2.90	3.00	(1.00)	1.00
Lower lower	0.19	3.00	2.10	1.00	2.00	4.00
Total						26.5
r						(0.3)

Hypothesis four provides for the notion that there is a positive correlation between a social class category and the individual's perception on consumption of halal food products. The results however demonstrate that a consumer's social class orientation has a negative relationship to an individual's perception on the consumption of halal food products as shown by the value $r = -0.30$. This reveals that sensitivity to consumption of halal food products is not in any way determined by an individual's degree of wealth (money, goods and services) and/or personal gratification such as prestige. This however gives a diametrically opposite perspective to Max Weber's assertion that the various dimension of social class have different influences on the consumption and its consequences (Encyclopaedia of Food and Culture, 2003)

6. Conclusions

The research article attempted to investigate the influence of socio-culture on consumers' perception of halal food products. The research was based on the analysis of the correlation that exist between the four socio-cultural variables (education, religion, occupation and social stratification) and the individual consumer's perception and consumption of food products in an urban set up. The key findings of this study demonstrate that although socio-cultural variables play a significant role on individual's perception and consumption of halal certified food products they are not key determinants in influencing the individual consumer. The level of education attained by a consumer has proved to have an insignificant influence on the consumption of halal food products. It has also been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that religion has little impact on the individual consumer's perception of halal food products save for Islam and other religions. This entails that most Christians do not uphold the teachings of the Bible and also consume other foods with specific dietary guidelines such as halal products without being cognisant of the impact they have on their health and psychological welfare. Finally the wealth of an individual does not in any way influence individual's perception and consumption of halal food products. Thus although people may have differential social class backgrounds, their perception on the consumption of halal food products is totally unrelated to their social class orientation.

7. Further Research

This particular research was carried out on a limited scale due to the limited resources (human, material and financial) and as such the results will not depict a broader perspective of this topic, hence the researchers

recommend that a further research be undertaken nationally so as to get a fuller picture of Zimbabwean consumers' perceptions of halal food products in relation to their socio-cultural backgrounds. Since we employed only four variables of socio-culture it may be prudent to carry a more comprehensive research which may encompass more cultural variables such as family, reference groups and ethnicity among others.

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