

## ETHNIC FOOD IN THE JOURNEY OF INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the importance of ethnic food to international college students in the U.S. An online survey was developed through reviewing the relevant literature, conducting focus groups, and administering a pilot study. The population of this study consisted of international students enrolled in universities across different regions of the U.S. Four hundred and eleven (411) questionnaires were received, 269 of which were usable. This research has discovered that ethnic food is important to international students and that the inclusion of ethnic food into on-campus dining options is a competitive advantage for universities who provide this service over those who do not. The study has also found that university administrators should pay more attention to providing ethnic food options in on-campus dining services. In addition, the study concluded that ethnic food operators need to focus on certain ethnic food items that international students consider when they dine out.

**Keywords:** International Students, Recruitment, Dining Habits, Ethnic Food

### INTRODUCTION

When international students travel to foreign countries, they undergo what is termed acculturation. This is because international travel inherently entails dealing with foreign cultures. The acculturation process engenders a change within the international travelers, which occurs as a result of their direct and continuous contact with people from different cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Nevertheless, any claim to acculturation adjustment would be incomplete without attention to food consumption; this is especially important considering the centrality of food to one's wellbeing (Locher et al., 2005). Food is a cultural symbol (Verbeke & Lo'pez, 2005). It is a cultural trait that humans learn throughout their primary development in childhood and a trait that consumers change with great reluctance in older age (Cervellon & Dube', 2005). All previous studies concluded that food habits and practices represent a central element of culture, and that it is anticipated that travelers would struggle to break away from their habituated food choices. This was confirmed in a more recent ethnographic study of the international student adjustment process, in which food emerged as a major research category (Brown, 2009). It was shown that dietary habits were of great importance both emotionally and physically; it was also an aspect of student life that was least open to change.

Ethnic food refers to the expression of food in terms of attitudes, values, behaviors and beliefs of a particular culture that express cultural traditions, heritage, religion, or national origin (Mora, 1998). Ethnic restaurants not only function as eating establishments, but also serve as "cultural ambassadors" that communicate the essence of a culture to local customers through its menu (Wood & Munoz, 2007). In many ethnic restaurants, the owners have roots in the original

culture that their restaurant represents. One example of cultural and ethnic diversity is the success of ethnic food restaurants in the American foodservice market. In 2009, ethnic food sales in the U.S. surpassed \$2.2 billion, and they were expected to increase by 20% by 2014 (US Ethnic Food Market, 2005). America's ethnic food market generates \$75 billion in annual sales; almost 65% of this is attributed to the restaurant sector of the foodservice industry (US Ethnic Food Market, 2005).

According to Onuorah and Ayo (2003, p. 235), dining habits are determined by "values, beliefs, and environmental and religious circumstances, all of which are products of tradition, culture, and contacts." The way people prepare and consume their food expresses their cultural values and social system (Murcott, 1982). According to Gochman (1997), culture distinguishes what we eat, how food is obtained, who prepares it, where, when, and with whom it is consumed. People arrange their food dining habits into structured systems according to the cultural system (Counihan, 1999). The ways in which people think about food differ depending on cultural ethnicity. For example, according to cross-cultural studies (Chandon, et al., 2000), French natives consider pleasure an important element in choosing food, while Americans generally consider food a source of energy; food safety is also a critical factor in selecting food. Ethnicity is not only an integral characteristic of an individual, but it is also a process of group identification in which people use ethnic labels [that involve aspects like opinions, cognition, affect, and knowledge] to define themselves and others as well (Rossiter & Chan, 1998; Jamal & Chapman, 2000). The retention of language and food preferences, as well as friendship networks, are among the most accepted dimensions of ethnic identity (Laroche, et al., 1999). Ethnicity affects consumer behavior through personal dress style, musical preferences, recreational activities, and the consumption of food and drink (Bocock, 1993, p.80). These factors have a strong impact on customers, especially in other countries; the unique elements of ethnic foods distinguish them from the local cuisine (Chandon, et al., 2000; Leclerc, et al., 1994). Satia-About, Paterson, Neutrouser, and Elder (2002) indicated that immigrants prefer to eat their traditional cuisine to overcome homesickness or to remember and share their original culture, a statement further supported by Brown (2009) who added that homesickness is accentuated further for those who live alone (for example, students), for whom eating seemed to be a source of nostalgia for a life full of companionship and sharing. Fieldhouse's (1995) suggested that the need for self-actualization is related to an innovative use of food, where new recipes and food experimentation becomes a personal trademark representing one's identity.

The need for obtaining and increasing the consumption of healthy food items is considered as a factor in the increased growth of ethnic foods. Recently in Europe, there has been an increase in the concern of consumers regarding food consumption, diet, health, and food safety (Verbeke & Viaene, 2000; Miles & Frewer, 2001, 2003). Generally, there is an inclination to consume a low fat diet as part of a healthy intake in order to reduce the risk of heart diseases. Previous

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research reveals significant associations between the quality of diet and the availability of healthy food items in stores (Cheadle et al., 1991; Fisher & Strogatz, 1999). Due to the lack of local area food stores, it becomes hard to find many healthy food options, which results in negatively affect dietary habits and contributes to the risk of obesity. The availability of supermarkets has been correlated with more fruit and vegetable consumption, more healthy diets, and lower levels of obesity (Morland et al., 2002a, 2006b; Laraia et al., 2004).

Studies reveal that deteriorated health, including higher levels of obesity and diabetes, is associated with an increased consumption of Western-style food (Burns, 2004; Gordon-Larsen, Harris, Ward, & Popkin, 2003; Himmelgreen, Bretnall, Peng, & Bermudez, 2005; Kedia, 2004; Saleh, Amanatidis, & Samman, 2002). Specifically, research has indicated that sojourners are unlikely to gain weight or be considered obese upon arrival in a western country, but they eventually converge to native-born levels over time (McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). It has been proved that transition to a new culture can lead to substance abuse, a high alcohol intake, altered dietary practices and an increased Body Mass Index (Abra'ido-Lanza, Chao, & Flo' rez, 2005; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2003; Lara, Gamboa, Kahramanian, Morales, & Bautista, 2005; McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). For example, Asian students within in the U.S., who had resided there at least three months before the start of their studies, reported a decrease in the number of meals consumed per day; nearly half of them skipped breakfast more than other meals. Substantial increases were observed in the consumption of fats, salty and sweet snack items, and dairy products, whereas the consumption of meat, meat alternatives, and vegetables significantly decreased. They also dined out less often, but when they did, they chose American fast food establishments (Pan et al., 1999).

Several personal behaviors can influence the health of individuals as a whole. In the U.S., the two main behaviors that have been considered especially harmful to the health of Americans are smoking and the lack of physical activity that results in obesity (Preston, Stokes, Mehta, & Cao, 2014). According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 18 % of deaths in the U.S. in 2000 were attributed to smoking and 15 % were caused by obesity (Mokdad et al., 2004, 2005). The years that students spend at colleges present a dissimilar set of dietary priorities, and unhealthy eating habits often get worse during this time period. When it comes to international students, poor eating habits become even more heightened due to the difficulties and challenges that those students encounter during the adaptation process to the new culture. According to Leong and Sedlacek (1986), adjustment difficulties are more predominant among international students than their U.S. counterparts. As a result, these adjustment difficulties can influence several life aspects of international students such as their psychological and physical health (Wan, Chapman, & Biggs, 1992).

The Institute of International Education's Open Doors 2014 reports that the number of international students attending colleges and universities within the U.S. increased by 7.7 percent to 270,128 during the 2013-2014 academic year, compared to 250,920 during the 2012-2013. International students contribute over \$27 billion to the U.S. economy through their expenditures; these expenditures encompass expenses such as tuition, room and board, health insurance, and other living expenses, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (IIE, 2014). Higher education is considered one of the U.S. top service sector exports, this is because international students provide monetary outflow to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2014). Since the U.S. is a multicultural and multiethnic nation, this national trend of hosting diverse international students will probably increase (Josiam & Monteiro, 2004; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007).

In line with the above notion, previous research has emphasized the importance of internationalizing campuses and the educational benefits stemming from the presence of international students in the U.S. (Jones, 2002; Yang; 2004). From a political perspective, educating the future leaders of foreign countries helps spread the political values of the U.S. and fosters mutual understanding of the U.S. throughout the world (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2003). Academically, international students have been recognized as an asset to higher education (Ward, 2002), with prior research suggesting that the presence of international students diversifies a student body with varieties of nationalities, cultures, and languages (Lewis, 2003). In addition, it contributes to classroom diversity, encourages cross-cultural dialogue, and enriches the learning environment and the experiences of domestic students (Hayward & Siaya, 2001; Rai, 2002; Ward, 2002).

Student recruitment and retention is important for academic institutions throughout the world (Yurtseven, 2002). In 2000, Lacina, noted that "if we want to attract and retain international students to our university campuses, we must focus on the students' needs and successes in the American university experience" (p. 26). Research has shown that most American colleges and universities have accepted international students into their programs without really thinking about what they were doing (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983). In these institutions, students are self-selected, and therefore come to the institution by accident or through word of mouth, often/most of the time from either a family member or close friend.

There seems to be an agreement among industry professionals, marketing researchers, and sociologists that customer interactions through word-of-mouth (WOM) can have a major impact on consumer response to a product and that product's advertising (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991). Because WOM is an inexpensive and reliable way of transmitting information about products and services, WOM plays an important role in diffusing information through consumer markets and shaping consumer attitudes (Mourali et al., 2005). In addition to being an important outcome in any service context, positive WOM has been shown to be one of the most important factors in attracting international students to higher education (Allen & Higgins, 1994). In a study by Lois Patton (2000), it was found that while many variables such as course offerings, facilities, distance, and fees are important, the major force behind selection criteria is word-of-mouth communication. The core service of a higher education institution, teaching, is intangible (McDougall & Snetsinger, 1990). Intangibility [or the lack of physical evidence for a service] forces a consumer to rely on sources of information such as word-of-mouth recommendations to arrive at purchase decisions (Webster, 1991).

In the same vein, students pay for services in the form of education, therefore, they claim they should be treated like customers (Kanji & Tambi, 1999). Bejou (2005) argues that since it is cheaper to retain existing customers than to attract new ones, it is also more efficient for academic institutions to focus on student satisfaction and retention, rather than undertaking aggressive marketing campaigns designed to attract more students. Bennett (2003) expounds upon this idea by noting how students who withdrawal may damage an institution's reputation through negative WOM comments, which can impact future student recruitment and retention efforts. Like normal customers, students undergo the usual consumption and post-consumption behavior. Therefore, satisfied students will engage in WOM communication, the recommendation of their university to potential students, returning to complete higher degrees (repeat purchase), cooperating with the university by offering placements for current students, giving guest lectures, and becoming valued alumni

(Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004a). As alumni, they provide financial support, promote the university through WOM, create supportive networks accessible to current and future students, and also provide role models for future student generations (Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004b). Zeithaml (1988) highlighted that customers' perception of value plays an important role in their purchase decision-making; this suggests that behavioral intentions are consequences of value perception. In essence, when customers have high levels of value perception from their consumer experiences, they are more likely to express positive behavioral intentions.

For a plethora of reasons, ethnic food is important in the lives of international students because it represents a basic part of their culture, history, faith, and individual identity (Eyoum & O'Neill, 2012). As a result, fulfilling the dietary needs of international students on campuses and in surrounding communities should be recognized as a competitive advantage from the perspective of universities. A clearer understanding of the importance and value of satisfying the ethnic diets of international students will give universities valuable insight into how to better satisfy their customers. In turn, this, will help these universities more effectively to fulfill the needs of existing international students and will make their institutions more attractive to future international students. Therefore, in current environments where universities are competing to enrich their campuses in an abundance of ways, the inclusion of providing proper on-campus ethnic food services for students could aid in creating a competitive advantage between universities.

Little empirical research exists on the role ethnic food plays in the journey of international students; food is usually mentioned only incidentally as one of the aspects that students find distressing in their acculturation process (Furukawa, 1997; UKCISA, 2009). There has been little research dedicated to the study of international student eating habits; studies by Henry and Wheeler (1980), Zwingmann and Gunn (1983) and Hall (1995) are rare, but old examples. Given the increase in international student numbers in recent decades, the changing source markets, and changing receiving and origin societies, there is a clear need for more contemporary research that is pertinent to new conditions. However, despite the importance of the international students to American educational institutions [and to the knowledge of the researchers], no previous study has addressed the importance of ethnic food to better accommodate international students in the U.S. This gap in research underscores the purpose of this study, which is identifying the importance of ethnic food to international students at American universities. More specifically, the objectives of this study are: 1) To examine the relationship between ethnic food provision by university on-campus dining options with international student's future behavioral intentions of recommending the university to others and self-reported personal health, 2) To identify the reasons which underline the potential importance attached to ethnic food, 3) To explore the current perceptions about the availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers, and, 4) To identify ethnic food dining habits of international students in the U.S.

## METHODS

### Sample

The target population for this study consisted of international students enrolled in universities across different regions of the U.S. The sample was intended to represent the general population of international students as much as possible. The following criteria were used to select participants: 1) must be 19 years of age or older, 2.) currently enrolled in the participating university, and 3) listed by their university as "International Students."

### Instrument Development and Focus Groups

Due to the lack of literature on ethnic food in general and from the perspective of international students in the U.S. in particular, two focus groups with 12 international students were conducted to identify pertinent variables for the survey. Several steps were taken to assure students confidentiality. Students were referred to by names of their choosing that were not their original ones, sessions were moderated by the researchers and notes were taken manually. At the beginning of the focus group sessions, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they were assured about the confidentiality of the focus group discussions. All focus group sessions were tape recorded and transcribed by the researchers. The total time of the focus group sessions was approximately 90 minutes each. Participants of the focus groups represented several regions around the world. The researchers asked questions, facilitated discussions, and encouraged participation between group members. A list of topics was prepared in advance of the focus group sessions, covering broad ethnic food-related issues such as: the importance of ethnic food to the participants, their ethnic food dining habits, the relationship between ethnic food and future behavioral intentions, the relationship between ethnic food and participants self-reported personal health, and the availability and the quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers in the areas surrounding participant residences in the U.S. Analyzing the data obtained from the focus group discussions took several steps. First, responses to each topic related to ethnic food were grouped. Then, researchers analyzed responses by looking for key words and themes. This process resulted in identifying clusters of key words in addition to phrases and themes that revolve around the issues that are important. Lastly, significant issues for each related topic were identified. The results of the analysis were used to formulate the survey instruments and questions. The findings of the focus groups were particularly important in the development of the variables used in this study.

Two pilot tests were employed before sending the final survey version: six international students were recruited through emails sent by the researchers and briefed about the purpose of the research, and they were requested to give their feedback. Based on the feedback gathered from the participants about relevance and clarity issues in the survey questions, a number of modifications were made to the survey. These changes included rewriting questions, shortening the length of the survey by combining several questions into one category, and, as a result, the completion time of survey was condensed.

The questionnaire consisted of six sections: a) demographic information, b) availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= Very Bad, 5= Very Good), c) self-reported personal health measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= Very Bad, 5= Very Good), d) dining habits, e) importance attached to ethnic food measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree), and f) future behavioral intentions measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree). The items used in this section were modified from (Zeithaml et al., 1996), and included three items.

Cronbach's Alpha (1951) is among the most commonly used reliability coefficient (Hogan, Benjamin & Brezinkisi, 2000). Cronbach's Alpha testes were computed to evaluate the internal reliability. The results of the Cronbach's Alpha test indicated that all scales measuring the availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailer ( $\alpha = 0.807$ ) and the future behavioral intentions ( $\alpha = 0.901$ ). The Cronbach's Alphas for both measures were above the recommended 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978).

### Data Collection and Analyses

Several regions across the U.S. were initially identified as representing the country; subsequently, a list of public universities in each of these regions was prepared. A list of ten universities from each region was selected randomly. The list was sent to the Office of International Education at Auburn University for their assistance in collecting the data. An email was sent from Auburn University's Office of International Education to the forty potential participating universities explaining and inviting them to participate in this study. Ten of them, including Auburn University, agreed to participate. Out of the ten, six universities eventually participated. These universities represent the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, and Texas. The data of this study were collected in collaboration with the Office of International Education at Auburn University. Collecting data took several steps. First, the researcher received permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Secondly, the researcher contacted and coordinated with the staff responsible for international admissions at the researcher's institution and at participating institutions. Thirdly, a cover letter was sent via email by the Office of International Education at Auburn University to participating schools that explained the purpose of this study and contained a link to the survey. Four hundred and eleven (411) questionnaires were received, 269 of which were usable. Returned questionnaires that had one missing answer were not used. The returned questionnaires were coded into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 21. Descriptive and frequency analyses were used to describe the characteristics of the sample. An independent t-test was used to test the differences between the universities who provide on-campus ethnic food dining services and those who do not and the future behavioral intentions and the personal self-reported personal health. Mean scores and standard deviation were used to interpret the importance attached to ethnic food, examine the current perceptions about the availability and quality of ethnic food, and lastly identify the ethnic food dining habits.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of the Sample

Male respondents accounted for 60.2% of the sample. About 35.3% belonged to the age group of 21 to 25 years of age. Moreover, the majority of the respondents 73.2% identified their marital status as being single. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Asian 32.7%. Bachelor Degrees were the highest among respondents 41.6% and approximately 37.5% currently enrolled as Ph.D. students. About 28.3% of the participants indicated they have been in the U.S. for less than one year (Table 1).

### Ethnic food provision by university on-campus dining options with international student's future behavioral intentions and self-reported personal health in the U.S.

The majority of the participating universities 66.9% do not have on-campus ethnic food options, and only 33.1% provide such services. An independent sample t-test showed a statistically significant difference in the scores of international students' future behavioral intentions for universities who provide on-campus ethnic food options ( $M=4.0524$ ,  $SD=.77508$ ) and those who do not ( $M=3.7500$ ,  $SD=.97573$ ). This result suggests that the inclusion of ethnic food into on-campus food options is associated with the future behavioral intentions of international students,  $t(267) = 2.552$ ,  $p=.011$ . The same test was also used to investigate the extent to which the inclusion of ethnic food into university on-campus food options is associated with the self-reported personal health of international students. This result indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between the responses obtained from both types of universities with regard to personal health the inclusion of ethnic food into on-campus food

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample (n=269)**

Characteristics	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	162	60.2
Female	107	39.8
<b>Age</b>		
Age 20 & Under	25	9.3
21 – 25	95	35.3
26 – 30	85	31.6
31 – 35	43	16.0
36 – 40	12	4.5
41 & Older	9	3.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	197	73.2
Married	66	24.5
Divorced	2	0.7
Separated	0	0.0
Widowed	0	0.0
Other	4	1.5
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	88	32.7
Asian-Indian	50	18.6
Black or African American	10	3.7
Caucasian	25	9.3
Hispanic	6	2.2
Latin American	17	6.3
Native American	0	0.0
Middle Eastern	56	20.8
Multi-Ethnic	3	1.1
Other	14	5.2
<b>Highest Education Obtained</b>		
Bachelor	112	41.6
Master	96	35.7
Ph.D.	15	5.6
Post Doctorate	7	2.6
Other	39	14.5
<b>Degree Currently Pursuing</b>		
Bachelor	69	25.7
Master	81	30.1
Ph.D.	101	37.5
Post Doctorate	10	3.7
Other	8	3.0
<b>Amount of Time in the U.S.</b>		
Less than 1 year	76	28.3
1 to less than 2 years	45	16.7
2 to less than 3 years	40	14.9
3 to less 4 years	44	16.4
More than 4 years	64	23.8

options,  $t(267) = 1.211$ ,  $p=.227$ . Although statistically insignificant, the respondents from universities who provide on-campus ethnic food options ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD=1.061$ ) indicated higher self-reported personal health than respondents from universities who do not provide similar services ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=1.091$ ) (Table 2).

### Further analysis of future behavioral intentions

To further understand the role of each item of the future behavioral intentions, additional analysis was conducted. The mean score and standard deviation of each item was calculated. According to the results, all items achieved high mean scores, which indicate that the future behavioral intentions of international students may be associated with the inclusion of ethnic food into university on-campus food options (Table 3).

**Table 2. T-Test Analysis of the Inclusion of Ethnic Food in On-Campus, Future Behavioral Intentions (FBI), and Self-Reported Personal Health (n=269)**

	N	Mean	SD	t-Value	df	Sig.
Ethnic food availability in university on-campus food court and FBI						
Yes	89	4.0524	.77508	2.552	267	.011
No	180	3.7500	.97573			
Ethnic food availability in university on-campus food court and self-reported personal health						
Yes	89	3.26	1.067	1.211	267	.227
No	180	3.09	1.090			

**The importance attached to ethnic food by international students**

Excluding faith, all other items have an average score of 3.40 and above, indicating that these items are important. The five most prominent and important ethnic food items were: the relationship between ethnic food and culture 3.99, the role that ethnic food plays in evoking memories of home 3.75, the relationship between ethnic food and national identity 3.54, the availability of ethnic food acts as a remedy for homesickness and ethnic food provides a real sense of belonging were equal with mean scores of 3.51, and ethnic food is related to diet 3.40. The least important attribute was ethnic food as related to faith 2.32 (Table 4).

**Availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers**

In regards to the respondent’s perceptions of the availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and ethnic food retailers that sell ethnic food ingredients, respondents revealed a moderate average of the availability with mean scores of 3.12 for restaurants and 3.04 for retailers. In relation to the availability of ethnic food restaurants, 47.2% of the participants mentioned that the availability of ethnic restaurants is fair, and 24.9% of which indicated that the availability is good. 18.6% of the sample stated that the availability of ethnic food restaurants is bad, around 5.9% mentioned that the availability is very good, and only 3.3% indicated that the availability is very bad. In terms of the availability of ethnic food retailers, 48.0% of the respondents indicated that the availability of ethnic retailers is fair, while 20.1% reported bad levels of availability, and 4.1% indicated that the availability is very bad. About 23.8% of the respondents perceived the availability of ethnic food retailers as good and 4.1 only mentioned it is very good.

With regard to the respondents’ perceptions of the quality of ethnic food restaurants and ethnic food retailers, participants revealed an average perception of the quality of ethnic food restaurants, with mean scores of 3.18 and 3.21, respectively. With regards to the quality of ethnic food restaurants, 50.9% of the respondents indicated that the quality is fair, 26.4% indicated it is good and 5.2% stated that the quality is very good. Among the respondents, 16.4% mentioned that the quality is bad, and 1.1% indicated that the quality is very bad. With respect to the quality of ethnic food retailers who sell ethnic

food ingredients for personal ethnic food cooking, 47.6% of the respondents indicated that the quality of ethnic food ingredients is fair, 31.2% indicated it is good and only 5.2% perceived the quality as very good. Of the respondents, 15.6% of the participants reported that the quality is bad and only 1.5% indicated that the quality is very bad (Table 5).

**Availability of ethnic food restaurants and retailers in the areas surrounding university campuses**

In terms of the availability of ethnic food restaurants and retailers in the areas surrounding university campuses. Respondents revealed a high average of the availability with mean scores of 1.40 for restaurants and 1.61 for retailers, respectively. A total of 59.9% of the respondents reported that ethnic food restaurants were available in the area surrounding university campuses, whereas 40.1% mentioned that such restaurants were not available. In terms of the availability of ethnic food retailers, 61.3% of the participants indicated that ethnic food retailers were available in the areas surrounding university campuses, whereas 38.7% indicated that ethnic food retailers were not available (Table 6).

**Ethnic food dining habits**

The majority of respondents reported that they prefer to cook at home 82.9%, and only 17.1% prefer to eat out. In terms of dining companions, 68.8% of the sample prefers to eat out with friends, 17.5% with spouse, 10.4% alone, 0.4% for business, and 3.0% chose other. With respect to how often participants typically eat out, the majority of the respondents 39.4% stated that they eat out once a week followed by those who eat out 2 – 3 times a week 23.4%. 15% of the sample eat out once a month, whereas those who eat out rarely

**Table 3. Analysis of Future Behavioral Intentions (n=269)**

Scale Items	Mean*	Standard Deviation
I would recommend my university to other international students	3.83	.990
I would say positive things about my university to other international students	3.93	.960
I would be happy to continue my education at my current university	3.79	1.080

\*Measured on a 5-point scale, where (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree

**Table 4. Importance Attached to Ethnic Food (n=269)**

Rank	Scale Items	Mean*	Standard Deviation
1	Ethnic food is related to my culture	3.99	1.022
2	Ethnic food helps in evoking memories of home	3.75	1.068
3	Ethnic food is related to my national identity	3.54	1.229
4	Ethnic food provides a real sense of my belonging	3.51	1.071
5	The availability of ethnic food is a remedy for homesickness	3.51	1.177
6	Ethnic food is related to my diet	3.40	1.192
7	Ethnic food is related to my faith	2.32	1.226

\*Measured on a 5-point scale, where (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree

**Table 5. Availability and Quality of Ethnic Food Restaurants and Retailers (n=269)**

	n	%
<b>Availability of Ethnic Food Restaurants (3.12 ± .892)</b>		
Very Bad	9	3.3
Bad	50	18.6
Fair	127	47.2
Good	67	24.9
Very Good	16	5.9
<b>Availability of Ethnic Food Retailers (3.04 ± .876)</b>		
Very Bad	11	4.1
Bad	54	20.1
Fair	129	48.0
Good	64	23.8
Very Good	11	4.1
<b>Quality of Ethnic Food Restaurants (3.18 ± .806)</b>		
Very Bad	3	1.1
Bad	44	16.4
Fair	137	50.9
Good	71	26.4
Very Good	14	5.2
<b>Quality of Ethnic Food Retailers (3.21 ± .807)</b>		
Very Bad	4	1.5
Bad	42	15.6
Fair	128	47.6
Good	84	31.2
Very Good	11	4.1

or daily consist of 10% for both, and only 1.5% chose other. Respondents were also asked to indicate how many miles on average in a month they travel to dine at ethnic food restaurants. A total of 34.6% of the participants mentioned they travel for 5 miles or less and 22.3% indicated that they travel for 25 miles or more. Almost 17.8% travel between 6 – 10 miles, 9.3% travel between 1 – 15 miles, 7.8% travel between 16 – 20 miles, and 8.2% travel between 21 – 25 miles. Participants were asked to report how many miles in a month they travel to purchase ethnic ingredients. 30.5% of the participants travel for 5 miles or less and 23.4% travel for 25 miles or more. About 13.8% travel between 6 – 10 miles, 10.4% travel between 11 – 15 miles, 10.8% travel between 16 – 20 miles, and 11.2% of respondents travel between 21 – 25 miles. Participants were asked to report how much money they spend a month on ethnic food; the majority of the sample 34.2% spend \$51.00 - \$100.00 a month, while 30.9% spend \$50.00 or less. A total of 12.3% of the respondents reported that they spend almost \$101.00 - \$150.00; 7.8% spend \$151.00 - \$200.00; 5.6% spend \$201.00 - \$300.00; 5.9% spend \$251.11 - \$300.00; and only 3.3% spend more than \$300.00 a month (Table 7).

**Table 6. Availability of Ethnic Food Restaurants and Retailers in the Areas Surrounding University Campuses (n=269)**

	n	%
<b>Ethnic Food Restaurants (1.40 ± 0.491)</b>		
Yes	161	49.9
No	108	40.1
<b>Ethnic Food Retailers (1.61 ± 0.488)</b>		
Yes	104	38.7
No	165	61.3

**Inclusion of ethnic food into university on-campus food options and the academic experience**

A total of 36.4% of the participants agreed with the statement that says universities should pay much more attention to include ethnic food into their normal dining services, and 32.7% strongly agreed. Only 3.7% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 7.1% disagreed. Participants who neither disagreed nor agreed consisted of 20.1%. In regard to whether the inclusion of ethnic food options into on-campus dining services would have a positive impact on participant's educational experience, 37.2% of the respondents agreed and 26.8% strongly agreed. Almost 4.5% strongly disagreed and 8.2% disagreed (Table 8).

**DISCUSSION**

It would appear that there is a possibility that Universities who offer ethnic food services into on-campus options are experiencing an enhanced benefit, compared to universities who do not. In fact, spreading positive statements about the university was found to be the most important item related to international students' future

**Table 7. Ethnic Food Dining Habits (n=269)**

Scale Items	n	%
<b>Dining Habits</b>		
Eat Out	46	17.1
Cook at Home	223	82.9
<b>Dining Accompany</b>		
Alone	28	10.4
With Spouse	47	17.5
With Friends	185	68.8
For Business	1	0.4
Other	8	3.0
<b>Frequency of Eating Out</b>		
Rarely	27	10
Daily	27	10
Once a Week	106	39.4
2 - 3 Times a Week	63	23.4
Once a Month	42	15.6
Other	4	1.5
<b>Miles in a Month Traveled to Dine at Ethnic Food Restaurants</b>		
5 miles or Less	93	34.6
6 - 10 miles	48	17.8
11 - 15 miles	25	9.3
16 - 20 miles	21	7.8
21 - 25 miles	22	8.2
More than 25 miles	60	22.3
<b>Miles in a Month Traveled to Purchase Ethnic Food Ingredients</b>		
5 miles or less	82	30.5
6 - 10 miles	37	13.8
11 - 15 miles	26	10.4
16 - 20 miles	29	10.8
21 - 25 miles	30	11.2
More than 25 miles	63	23.4
<b>Amount Spent on Ethnic Food in a Month</b>		
\$50.00 or less	83	30.9
\$51.00 - \$100.00	92	34.2
\$101.00 - \$150.00	33	12.3
\$151.00 - \$200.00	21	7.8
\$201.00 - \$250.00	15	5.6
\$251.00 - \$300.00	16	5.9
More than \$300.00	9	3.3

behavioral intentions, in addition to the willingness to recommend the university to others. These findings are consistent with the focus group results presented earlier in this study. The results are also consistent with the literature of the Word-of-Mouth and future behavioral intentions. Positive Word-of-Mouth (PWOM) has been recognized as being among the most important factors in attracting international students to higher education (Allen & Higgins, 1994). This is because ethnic food is an essential part of culture, national identity, evoking memories of home, and remedy for home sicknesses. There was no statistically significant difference between responses obtained from universities who provide on-campus ethnic food options and universities who do not provide similar services and the self-reported personal health. This finding is consistent with the finding of (Camillo, Kim, Moreo & Ryan, 2010), who addressed the most popular attributes of Italian cuisine in the U.S., discovering that health benefits were among the least popular attributes. However, this result could potentially be explained with the assumption that health is a personal issue. For some students, it might be an important aspect of their personality and they may know how to keep themselves fit, regardless of whether ethnic food is available to them on-campus or not. In other words, students who pay special attention to their fitness may place less emphasis on the inclusion of ethnic food into on-campus dining options when reporting about their health. Another possible explanation for this finding is that seeking healthy food items does not have to be associated with consuming ethnic food; in other words, not all ethnic food items are healthy. Therefore, people choose healthier food when they travel to a new culture, regardless of whether these food items are ethnic or not. Also, immigrants who consider health an important issue when eating can choose food from other ethnicities. Moreover, it does not have to be from their native dining choices since they want to eat only healthy food regardless of the origin of the food.

With regard to the reasons underlining the potential importance attached to ethnic food, seven items were used. Six of the seven items scored (3.40 and above), namely the relationship between ethnic food and culture, ethnic food helps in evoking memories of home, the relationship between ethnic food and national identity, ethnic food provides a sense of belonging, ethnic food is a remedy for homesickness, and the relationship between ethnic food and diet. The relationship between ethnic food and faith scored the least (2.32). In the focus groups when participants were asked about the reasons why ethnic food was important to them, varied reasons were indicated in the responses. Participants revealed that ethnic food is important to their culture because they connect to it through the food they prepare and consume. They mentioned that they often use their home country food as a means of retaining their cultural identity. Food plays an essential role as a cultural product because it

defines who we are, creating distinctions between us and others. Therefore, students considered their home country food as a way to maintain, distinguish and validate their national identity. In terms of health and diet, there was consensus among the focus group participants that eating ethnic food was one of the ways to preserve their physical health and to avoid weight gain. In fact, many participants indicated that their home country food can be used as a medicine in some situations. Some students stated that they were getting worried about their health because of the high levels of fat and cholesterol in the western food items. Ethnic food was found to be a remedy of homesickness for the majority of participants. They said that ethnic food is associated with home, and it has the ability to reduce feelings of sadness for home. The consumption of home food helps requite for some unavoidable stressors, which means offering them a chance to remember the past happy moments and forget the sad present ones. Some participants indicated that ethnic food is important to them because it is part of their faith; they indicated that they were not allowed to eat all types of food because there are regulations that control their consumption. These empirical findings lend support to the propositions presented in previous studies (Sattia-About, Paterson, Neuthouser, & Elder, 2002; Brown, 2009; Fieldhouse, 1995).

Furthermore, the result provides confirmation to Verbeke and Lo'pez (2005) who indicated that exotic flavor commonly evokes memories of vacations in unusual locations, reflects and strengthens friendships, and promotes openness to new cultures. Given that almost all students who participated in the focus groups have mentioned these links explicitly, the five items that scored the highest were supported by the data gathered from survey of international graduate students in the U.S. The result pertaining to the least scored item, (of faith) is interesting. Faith-related concerns didn't seem as important as the other connections. Multiple perspectives could explain this finding. In the process of acculturation, new immigrants tend to abolish their original cultural identity and seek contact with members of the host community, a phenomenon described as assimilation according to Zagefka & Brown (2002). Applied to the finding of this study, international students may ignore some of their religious concerns when they move to a new culture, or it may be that the foreign circumstances are not conducive to their religious; as a result, they may abandon some religious food habits. It is also possible that faith is less of a concern for international students simply because food that is prepared and served in accordance with their faiths is not available, leading them to accept an alternative type of food.

With regard to the current perceptions held by international students on the availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers in the U.S., participants reported an overall moderate average of

**Table 8. Inclusion of Ethnic Food into University On-Campus Food Options and the Academic Experience (n=269)**

Scale Items	n	%
<b>Universities should give much more consideration to include ethnic food into on-campus dining services</b>		
Strongly Disagree	10	3.7
Disagree	19	7.1
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	54	20.1
Agree	98	36.4
Strongly Agree	88	32.7
<b>The inclusion of ethnic food options into on-campus food dining services would have a positive impact on educational experiences</b>		
Strongly Disagree	12	4.5
Disagree	22	8.2
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	63	23.4
Agree	100	37.2
Strongly Agree	72	26.8

perceptions about the availability of ethnic food restaurants. Based on the data gathered from the focus groups, participants' perceptions regarding the availability and quality of ethnic food restaurants and retailers were lower. This is because most participants mentioned that they usually leave towns in order to either dine at ethnic food restaurants or purchase ethnic ingredients for personal cooking. This finding could be justified by the fact that six universities have participated in this study, so it might be in some towns surrounding participated campuses ethnic food provisions were more available than the area where the focus groups were conducted. This could explain the lower average level of perceptions in regards to the availability of ethnic food restaurants and ethnic food retailers. Clearly, the business community around some university campuses is not fully aware of international students as a target market.

The majority of respondents prefer to cook at home, this result could be an indication of a lack of ethnic food restaurants. Or it might be the service and diversity available in these restaurants that is not adequate, leading international students to cook at home. This could also be attributed to the data showing that the majority of respondents are graduate students who are not required to live on campus and participate in meal plans. The focus group work revealed two pertinent issues regarding dining habits: some international student's limited budgets, and, the tastes of ethnic food ingredients are not the same as those which can be found in their home country. Therefore, when international students cook at home they save money and at the same time try to assimilate a taste that is closer to home than that is offered by restaurants. In terms of whom they eat with, most of participants mentioned that they usually eat out with friends. This finding is consistent with other previous research. For example, Counihan and Van Esterk (1997) argue that eating and sociability are intertwined, and this was a student experience. To some extent, this result is consistent with the findings of National Restaurant Association (2000), which indicated that Chinese restaurants represent "basic family appeal" and attracts almost all consumers (Mills, 2000). Also, this finding supports the focus group findings which indicated that ethnic food represents many aspects of the participants' lives beyond hunger satisfaction only. It represents a form of social gathering, socializing, and enjoying the company of friends. Despite the busy time of most of students, the majority of them indicated that they eat out once a week and 2 to 3 times a week. This means that ethnic food is important and it plays a basic role in their lives, which explains why international students give it priority in their schedules.

With regard to miles, participants usually travel monthly to dine at ethnic food restaurants and to purchase ethnic food ingredients which are used for personal home cooking. Participants who travel 5 miles or less were the majority, followed by those who travel for more than 25 miles. Obviously, in some universities, ethnic food restaurants and retailers are available, while for some areas they are not. This means that some areas surrounding college towns are missing this kind of services, it would be worthy for business practitioners and university administrators to think of how to serve international students target by fulfilling their ethnic food needs. Comparing this result to the findings of the focus groups, some participants mentioned that they often leave their town to meet their ethnic dining needs by eating at ethnic food restaurants or purchasing ethnic food ingredients. In relation to the amount of money participants spend in a month on ethnic food, the majority of respondents spend between \$51.00 - \$100.00, followed by those who spend between \$50.00 or less. This means that despite the limited budgets of some international students, they still spend a portion of their income to fulfill their ethnic dining needs. A possible explanation

for this lies in the expense of some kinds of ethnic foods. Some participants in the focus groups stated they save a certain amount of money every month to dine at ethnic food and purchase ethnic food ingredients. Their only problem was with the relatively high prices of both dining and purchasing ethnic ingredients.

## CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

The relevance of this study is rooted in the topic it has investigated. Although some studies have concentrated on other aspects of international students, research that considers the importance of ethnic food [as a relevant variable in the overall experience of the international students] does not exist. Implications of findings of this study can be derived from university administrators and from ethnic food operators/owners.

The findings obtained in the present study provide evidence that there is a lack of attention concerning ethnic food dining needs in American educational institutions. This should incline university administrators to be aware of this issue and subsequently, solve it. Only (33.1%) of the participating universities in the present study provide on-campus ethnic dining services and (66.9%) do not. Therefore, university administrators must take more action to include ethnic dining services into their current on-campus options. According to Namvar (2000), accurate and timely information with regard to what is likely to happen to the economy and society has always been an important issue for business decision makers. Given that the enrollment of international students is increasing, knowing how to satisfy the needs of these unique students will be of value to university administrators especially within the intensive competition environment of attracting and retention more international students.

Universities who provide on-campus ethnic options are experiencing a better reputation among international students over those universities who do not. But to improve ethnic options, those universities should concentrate on issues that have more attachment to ethnic food. Those aspects of ethnic food are the most important, which means that improving current services is necessary to satisfy international ethnic food requirements. Also, pursuant to the results, faith should not be considered when improving services because it comparatively has a low attachment to ethnic food. But it might be worth considering when it comes to those ethnicities whose religion impacts their consumption, such as Muslims and Jews, where there are sets of restrictions and specific ways of processing food.

To better understand the specifics of various ethnicities, universities could discuss with various groups of international students their needs and preferences regarding their ethnic food. Those universities should learn from past trends and apply the information obtained to their present and future schemes when it comes to market the university. As the number of international students increase in most of the U.S. university and college campuses, these institutions will need to always be looking for feedback from their target customers, because it helps them provide products and services that these students want. By identifying who their customers are and what they want, universities will have an easier time bringing them in, providing them with value, and bringing them back. With regard to marketing and recruiting efforts, universities are competing to attract international students due to the benefits they bring. In doing so, universities use different marketing and recruiting tactics such as: employing on-campus ethnic dining to better recruitment efforts.

Learning from and benchmarking with universities in the U.S. with proven ethnic food operations on campus can be a step in the right direction. Universities who do not serve ethnic food into on-campus



food court should pay attention and take note of their counterparts who provide these options.

This study sheds light on the somewhat lack of the ethnic food provision in terms of ethnic food restaurant and retailers that sell ethnic food ingredients for personal cooking in some of the areas surrounding universities. Although ethnic food positively affects universities who offer this service, business operators interested in this area could be positively affected as well. From the perspective of ethnic food restaurant owners/operators, especially in the areas surrounding campuses, identifying the wants and needs of international students is a vital issue to help businesses succeed. According to the results revealed in this study, businesses need to focus on the cultural aspects of ethnic food items, rather than religious ones. They also should diversify their menus to include different food ethnicities in order to encompass all international student backgrounds. For meeting international students' needs, ethnic restaurant's personality and style should be defined by the ethnic food theme and should be mostly appealing to the needs of international students. As the number of international students continues to increase the need for more ethnic food restaurants and retailers will increase as well. Ethnic food retailers also need to consider the way they conduct their business. They need to diversify the ingredients as much as possible, and the taste of ingredients should assemble the taste found in the origin of that ethnic food as much as possible.

Although this research has been carefully prepared, there are some unavoidable limitations. According to the Open Doors report 2014, Asia is the highest place of origin for international students who come to the U.S; the number of students from Asia in the U.S increased by 8.1% in 2013-2014 to 568,510 students. This could potentially affect the results of this study because if there is a greater percentage of availability in Asian dining options, Asian students may report better perceptions of ethnic food dining options than students of other ethnicities. Therefore, the dominance of Asian students may skew the results. Another limitation is that only six universities actually participated in this study. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results of this study beyond its scope. Based on the lack of previous research addressing the issue of ethnic food and university students, this study is considered to be exploratory in nature, thus limiting the application of the results to other populations outside of the one investigated here. Another limitation of the current study which should be addressed in future research is the sample itself. No details about ways to segment the sample population were provided in the current study, but instead the sample was treated as a singly homogenous population. Differences in the age, marital status and even the gender of the respondents may have an effect on the behaviors of international students, especially in regards to their cooking and eating out habits. In addition, because there is a paucity of published work within this area and based on the focus group sessions, it was decided by the researchers to let the respondents themselves perceive the availability of ethnic food restaurants and retailers through the natural course of the study. Also, using only one question to measure self-reported personal health is not reliable. Therefore, more measurements should be added in future research. Lastly, future research should examine the relationship, if there is any, between the length of staying in the U.S. and international students' perceptions of ethnic food.

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