

How do people choose what food to buy? Researchers build a research tool for African countries

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You're in a shop or market and you're buying food for the next day. How do you choose what to buy? Does it depend on how much you can spend,

on what's the healthiest, the most attractively packaged? Understanding this is an important part of food product development as well as consumer education and diet interventions for better public health.

Researchers all over the world use tools such as [questionnaires](#) to study what motivates people's food choices. However, most of these questionnaires were developed in the global north using insights from people living in those contexts. The food choice determinants of people in emerging economies like South Africa, where a large percentage of the population live [below the national poverty line](#), may not be fully captured by these instruments.

So, as a researcher in consumer food science working on a Ph.D. about the factors driving food choice in an emerging economy, I [set out, with my supervisors](#), to develop a questionnaire suitable for use in this context.

A more relevant research tool can provide a more accurate understanding of the factors driving people's food choices. This could inform necessary changes in a country like South Africa, where diseases related to diet or lifestyle, like hypertension, are [among the leading causes of death](#).

The study

To gather insights on the factors driving food choice in this context, we conducted focus group discussions with urban people from low, middle and high income backgrounds. Each discussion included between four and six people—a small group, to make sure participants had ample opportunity to contribute.

Focus group discussions can reveal diverse views and insights from people with different habits, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. This

method allowed us to collect detailed data and to encourage interaction among participants, which could uncover more insights.

We collected hundreds of statements about people's reasons for eating or purchasing certain food. Then we built surveys, which we sent out to wider groups of people online and analyzed statistically.

From this we obtained a seven-factor food choice questionnaire with 31 statements. The factors were: 1) Healthy eating constraints, 2) Emotional eating, 3) Meat appeal, 4) Frugality (being money savvy), 5) Quality seeking, 6) Cooking constraints and 7) Weather.

The findings

Several of these factors were unique; they don't appear in conventional food choice questionnaires. For instance, those questionnaires don't ask about constraints to healthy eating (like "I find it hard to change poor food habits"); instead they tend to feature health-positive questions (like "It's important to me that the food I eat on a typical day is nutritious").

Another example is the importance of eating meat. Although unusual compared to other food choice instruments, the presence of a distinct meat-related factor is appropriate and fitting in this context. For many Africans, eating meat is [aspirational](#) and an [important part of culture and socialization](#). Everyday meals and special occasions are also planned and built around meat.

In contrast, people in developed countries like Australia, Canada, Belgium, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Singapore are adjusting to eating less meat and it may lose its significance in these countries.

Sustainability matters

Eating less meat has [been identified](#) as a way to make the global food system more sustainable.

But just because our participants considered meat an important part of their preferred diets does not mean that they don't think about sustainability. They were strongly averse to wasting food, partly because their resources were limited. This is likely true for the general South African population.

Sub-Saharan Africa [produces less post-harvest waste](#) than Europe and the Americas, and the least household food waste when compared to Europe, the Americas and Asia. This shows that the behaviors contributing to sustainability vary by geographical area.

Surprisingly, despite weather being a driver of food choice in this study, it has not been reflected in any other food choice measurement output. It is not typically asked or featured as a food choice driver.

Compared to developed countries, there is often much less infrastructure in South Africa to protect people from temperature extremes during the warm and cold seasons. Thus, it is more probable that people in South Africa would rely more on food to either cool down or keep warm. This explains why weather was a significant food choice driver among our respondents.

Why this matters

We have produced an alternative food choice questionnaire for use in emerging economies: a food choice questionnaire for Africans, by Africans.

This questionnaire is nuanced and can be used by researchers in such contexts to understand the factors driving [food choice](#).

For instance, governments could use the questionnaire to collect data about the barriers to [healthy eating](#), then prepare specific, evidence-based messaging to educate people or to inform policies related to the food environment.

The questionnaire could also be used for diet intervention strategies specific to certain demographic groups and inform the development of new food products.

We have not stopped at developing the questionnaire. We've also conducted a follow-up, cross-cultural study as part of the [InnoFood Africa project](#). The questionnaire has been administered to urban dwellers in seven countries (South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, France, Finland and Norway). Analysis of the data will begin soon.

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