

# A Cross-cultural Study of Food Purchase Decision in Taiwan and Vietnam

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**Abstract**—Based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, this study is to investigate the effect of culture and demographic variables on the perception of consumer related to buying decision on food. A survey was conducted in Taiwan and Vietnam, including 367 respondents (227 Taiwanese students and 140 Vietnamese students). The findings indicated that Taiwanese students perceive the factors such as price and convenience are more important than Vietnamese student in their food purchase decision on product choices. However, Vietnamese students perceived that health, sensory appeal, and weight control are more important when choosing the food. The results founded that Taiwanese students perceive the factors such as familiarity and promotion are more important than Vietnamese student in food purchase decision about brand choices. Vietnamese students perceived that ethical concern, brand value, and political concern are more important when choosing the brand of food. The findings implied that Vietnamese students, with higher power distance and lower uncertainty avoidance, perceive the factors such as health, sensory appeal, weight control, ethical concern, brand value, and political concern more important in their purchasing decision on food. On the opposite, Taiwanese students, with lower power distance and higher uncertainty avoidance, perceive that price, convenience, familiarity, and promotion are more important in their choice. This result supported that culture has effects on food purchase decision. The results also implied that gender has a significant effect on consumption of food. Female students place more emphasis on sensory appeal, weight control and ethical concern than those of male students in food purchase decision. The findings also provided that students lived in city perceived mood, sensory appeal, familiarity and promotion are more important than those lived in rural when making food purchase decisions.

**Index Terms**—Culture, Demographic variables, Hofstede’s dimensions, Purchase decisions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization creates not only opportunities but also great challenges for any field of business. Marketing is not an exception; especially in Vietnam and Taiwan which are both developing countries and have closed trade relationship. Culture and consumer behavior interact with each other, purchase decisions are often affected by cultural factors [1]. To convince customers to purchase their products, marketers usually use cultural representations, especially in promotional

appeals. This study aims to provide comparative information about the effect of culture on consumer behavior in Vietnam and Taiwan. Specifically, this study examines purchase behaviors of Vietnamese and Taiwanese undergraduates regarding to the perceptive differences in consumption and also investigates the factor such as gender which influence buying decision. The findings are expected to provide the implications of culture on marketing strategy and necessary information for those who are interested in the food business in Taiwan and Vietnam.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Consumer Behavior

The criteria used by customers in the evaluation of alternatives depend on the type of product involved. According to the findings of Jane [2], milk or similar beverages, for example, identified: utilitarian versus hedonistic, ordinary versus luxury, and refreshing. Meat products have key criteria such as taste intensity, taste evaluation, and fatness...The criteria used in the evaluation process can be categorized such as: attributes, consequences, and values. In this, Attributes are the physical characteristics of product, which are directly related product itself. Benefits or consequences are the outcomes of product use; tea, for example, is thirst quenching; they present what the product is perceived to be doing for us; and we tend to think about products in term of benefit, not their attributes. Values are mental representations of important life goals that customers are trying to achieve. They are cognitive representations of preferred end states of being or modes of behavior [3]. The attitude toward an alternative is based on the integration of perceptions of the alternatives on the various evaluative criteria. Perceptions on the evaluative criteria can be formed based on three types of processes: descriptive, informational, and inferential perception formation [4]. Perceptions can be also formed by accepting information about evaluative criteria provides by some outside source such as friends, advertisements and magazines.

Base on theories, the product alternative with the most positive attitude will be chosen. However there are number of factors that weaken the relation between attitude and choice behavior in the context of foods. Attitude was more important than social influences in explaining choice behavior for milk, coffee, fruit juice, and drinks. Choice sometimes also influenced by pressures from the social environment [1].

Perceived behavioral control is low when the consumer’s favorite brand is frequently out of stock, or when it is not carried by supermarket patronized by the customer [5]. Due to the increased globalization of food markets, many food

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Jane [2] implied customers experience concerns after making a purchase decision. This arises from a concept that is known as “cognitive dissonance”. The customer, having bought a product, may feel that an alternative would have been preferable. In these circumstances that customer will not repurchase immediately, but is likely to switch brands next time.

### B. Hofstede's Culture dimensions

Culture is part of the external influences that impact the consumer. That is, culture represents influences that are imposed on the consumer by other individuals. The definition of culture offered in textbook is “That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man person as a member of society” [4].

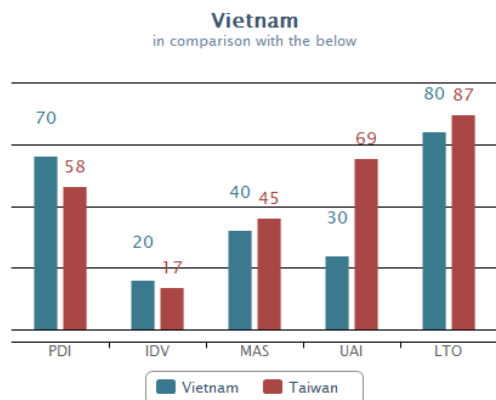


Fig.1: Vietnam and Taiwan in comparison with the Hofstede's dimensions, source: <http://geert-hofstede.com/vietnam.html> (2012)

1) *Power Distance*: Based on the study of Hofstede [6], Vietnam has a power distance index score of 70, while Taiwan has a lower score of 58. The higher score of the Vietnamese indicates they recognize greater difference in status between leaders and subordinates, and are more used to inequality than their Taiwanese counterparts. Individuals with low power distance scores take superiors' orders more challenge themselves by their decision. Taiwanese students also love to eat fried chicken and McDonalds instead of the traditional food in Taiwan. The high power distance characteristic is present in the daily life of Vietnamese as well as in business. In the family, sons and daughters have to obey parents' orders. In organizations, there is a clear subordinate-superior relationship. Titles, status, and formality are very important in Vietnamese society [7].

2) *Uncertainty avoidance*: Uncertainty avoidance involves

the extent to which a structured situation with clear rules is preferred to a more ambiguous one; in general, countries with lower uncertainty avoidance tend to be more tolerant of risk [1]. Hofstede found that individuals in high uncertainty avoidance societies believed that the rules and guidelines were adhered to consistently and rigidly. They are more likely to follow a formalized set of social norms than those in low uncertainty avoidance nations. Reviewing the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, Taiwan's uncertainty avoidance index value is medium high at 69, while that of the Vietnam is lower at 30. Individuals in a high uncertainty avoidance culture might view the live practices which are done legally as less unethical than those in low uncertainty avoidance culture [8]. People in Taiwan reflecting a higher uncertainty avoidance culture tend to focus more on legality than ethicality of their actions, compared to those in Vietnam. Vietnamese culture displays moderate uncertainty avoidance [7]. People in society feel threatened by ambiguous situations and try to avoid these situations by providing greater job stability, establishing more formal rules, and rejecting deviant ideas and behavior.

3) *Individualism/collectivism*: This dimension describes the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society. In individualistic societies, personal achievement is recognized culturally with rewards for competing within the groups. Individuals are expected to care for themselves with little concern for others. On the contrary, in collective societies, people think of themselves as benefiting from the group and are recognized for sacrificing personal interest to collective goals [8]. The Vietnam scores higher on individualism dimension (20) while Taiwan scores lower (17). This lower score is a strong indication that Taiwan has a collectivist culture [6]. Collectivism has existed for a very long time in Vietnam. It is characterized by tight social frameworks and self-functioning communities. People expect 'in groups' to look after their members to protect them, and provide them with security in return for their loyalty. Vietnamese people place importance on fitting in harmoniously and avoiding losing the other's face. In conflicts, they prefer to come out with a win-win situation [7].

4) *Masculinity / femininity*: According to the studies of Hofstede [6], individuals in a feminine society would be more concerned about environmental issues. The preservation of the environment will be of more value in countries with lower masculine cultures. Individuals in masculine societies tend to be assertive, aggressive, ambitious, competitive, and materialistic while individuals in feminine societies tend to be modest, humble, nurturing, and concern for the environment. Individuals in masculine cultures value material success and assertiveness more than nurturance and caring as reflected in feminine cultures. Taiwan (45) was found to be more masculine than Vietnam (40). In addition to food, Vietnamese men and women describe themselves and their relationships with language about animals. It is no surprise that Vietnamese men drink wine mixed with goat blood and eat goat testicles with the hopes of increasing their body stamina. Vietnamese women concern themselves with the past and the future in the home.

5) *Time Orientation*: In Hofstede's framework (2012), the Taiwanese culture takes a long-term view of outcomes compared to short-term orientation in the Vietnam. Based on

Hofstede's study, Vietnam scored 80 on the scale, tradition-oriented society whereas Taiwan scored 87 which is a high score on this scale. People in a short-term oriented country like the United States tend to place more importance on living for the moment and personal happiness while Taiwanese in a long-term oriented culture tend to emphasize the value of persistence, savings and patience [8]. People such as Taiwanese in a long-term orientation were more willing to subordinate themselves for a group, order and observe relationships by status, and persevere toward achieving the goal. In contrast, people such as Vietnamese having a short-term orientation tend to expect or seek quick results and "keep up with the Joneses". Economists have observed that the degree of industrialization is a key factor in determining different perceptions of time from culture to culture. In developing a theory of time allocation, Yakup, Mücahit and Reyhan [9] revealed that a rise in earning would induce a decline in the amount of time used at consumption activities, because time would become more expensive. Time orientation in Taiwan is treated differently or practiced at a slower pace than time perception in more developed nations.

### C. Gender and Consumer Behavior

According to the study of Firat [10], "gender is the cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles". About the same time that children become cognizant of their biological sex, they also have an awareness of culturally-derived gender norms; for example, children know positive stereotypes of their own sex and negative stereotypes about the other sex [4]. Thus, at a very early age, children begin to develop a belief system with respect to cultural gender roles. According to the study of Li [11], "gender is one of the earliest and most central components of the self-concept and serves as an organizing principle through which many experiences and perceptions of self and other are filtered". The process of consumption has long been associated with sex and gender, thus, it comes as no surprise that consumer researchers often examine the effects of these variables on consumer behaviors [12]. It also comes as no surprise that much is known about sex and gender and how they impact buying and consuming activities. Yet there is one gender-related variable, gender identity, which has both intrigued and perplexed consumer behavior researchers for over four decades.

Gender identity, sometimes referred to as an individual's psychological sex, has been defined as the "fundamental, existential sense of one's maleness or femaleness" [13]. Since gender is culturally derived, gender identity is similarly rooted in cultural understandings of what it means to be masculine or feminine. For many years, sex and gender were thought to be inseparable that is, men were masculine and women were feminine. But what consumer behavior researchers, among others, recognized long ago was that some men were more feminine than masculine while some women were more masculine than feminine. In the postmodern culture in which we now live, this separation of gender from sex is even more apparent [1]. In more recent literature, the potential contribution of gender identity research to the

understanding of consumer behavior has been questioned since the meanings of masculinity and femininity have blurred. Given these concerns, the purpose of this paper is to present a thorough review of consumer behavior studies in the marketing literature that have examined gender identity.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to investigate consumer behavior of Vietnamese undergraduate students and Taiwanese undergraduate students in food purchase decision. Research questions and hypotheses are as followings:

RQ1: What is the effect of culture on the food buying decision of undergraduate students in Vietnam and Taiwan?

H1: There is no difference in food choice between undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan.

H2: There is no difference in food's brand choice between undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan

RQ2: What is the effect of gender on the food buying decision of undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan?

H3: There is no difference in food choice between male and female undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan.

H4: There is no difference in food's brand choice between male and female undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan.

RQ3: What is the effect of residence on the food buying decision of undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan?

H5: There is no difference in food choice between undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan by residence.

H6: There is no difference in food's brand choice between undergraduate student in Vietnam and Taiwan by residence.

The survey was conducted by using questionnaire to solicit responses from undergraduate students in Vietnam and Taiwan. An incidental (convenience) sampling method is employed to decide the number and location of colleges in each country. By this way, it is possible to get a large amount of data to be analyzed statistically. In first section, respondents were asked to express the importance of the items which may affect their decisions on purchasing food on a five-point scale for measurement which range from "1" (not important) to "5" (very important). The final section was designed to acquire the respondent's information regarding demographic data such as gender, residence, living expenses and expenditure on food.

Listed below are a series of factors that may be relevant to respondent's food purchase decision. Respondents were required to read each item carefully and decide how important the item is.

1. Satisfies basic hungry (gives vitality and energy)
2. Keeps healthy (nutritious, contains lots of vitamins and minerals, high protein...)
3. Price (cheap, not expensive)
4. Conveniences (can be order in shop/restaurants close to where you live or work, easy or no need time to prepare....)
5. Mood (make you feel good, help you relax, cheers you up, or help to keep you awake and alert...)
6. Sensory Appeal (taste good, smells nice, looks nice or has a

- pleasant texture...)
- 7. Fashion ( popular)
- 8. Weight control (low calories or low in fat...)
- 9. Familiarity (what you usually eat, or the food you ate when you were child...)
- 10. Ethical concern (packaged in an environmentally friendly way, contains natural ingredients, no artificial ingredients)
- 11. Brand value (brand name, well known name, or your style ...)
- 12. Frequency of advertisements and Promotion schemes/discounts (Free gift or Lottery)
- 13. Political concern (from countries approve of or against politically)

Firstly, the questionnaire was reviewed by some professors in I-Shou University and some marketing experts. Secondly, a pre-testing was performed by asking to 5 students in Vietnam and Taiwan. They were asked to critique the cover letter, the instructions, and each of the questions and answers. This ensured that they interpreted the researcher's intentions correctly. The population was undergraduate student in both Vietnam and Taiwan who are studying university. The sample in this study can be described as a convenient sample since it is

TABLE I  
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE S

Country	N	Percent	Vietnam	Taiwan
Vietnam	140	38.15		
Taiwan	227	61.85		
Gender				
Male	123	33.51	48 (34.29)	75 (33.04)
Female	244	66.49	92 (65.71)	152 (66.96)
Residence				
City	240	65.40	64 (45.71.)	176 (77.53)
Rural	127	34.60	76 (54.29)	51 (22.47)
Living cost per month	N	Percent		
Under \$99	56	15.26		
\$100-\$149	112	30.52		
\$150-\$199	72	19.62		
\$200-\$299	75	20.44		
\$300-\$399	28	7.63		
Over \$400	24	6.54		
Expenditure on food per month	N	Percent		
Under \$49	61	16.62		
\$50-\$99	124	33.79		
\$100-\$149	101	27.52		
\$150-\$199	37	10.08		
\$200-\$299	29	7.90		
Over \$300	15	4.09		

not selected randomly. Rather, the researcher has contacted universities in Vietnam and universities in Taiwan. The survey yield meaningful responses and over 100 students participated in the survey for each country.

The researcher collected data by sending email to undergraduate students in Vietnam and Taiwan. The content of the email included a questionnaire, a cover letter and two return-email addresses. The cover letter described the content of the survey and explained the importance of a response. To ensure a high level of response from undergraduate students,

researcher went to classes of university in Ho Chi Minh City to deliver the questionnaires to respondents. 367 questionnaires were collect in this research. Cronbach's alpha of this survey is 0.889.

#### IV. RESULTS

All 367 participants used for analysis in the present research were undergraduate students. As shown on Table 1, 227 participants are from Taiwan, ROC (61.85%); and 140 participants are from Vietnam (38.15%). General demographic information was reported by participants. Of the 367 total respondents, 123 (33.51%) were males and 244 (66.49%) were females. Most of them were from city (65.40%), and the

TABLE II  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Items	Country	Mean	Gender	Mean	Residence	Mean
Satisfies your basic hungry	Vietnam	3.84	Male	3.98	City	3.99
	Taiwan	3.98	Female	3.90	Rural	3.81
Keeps you healthy	Vietnam	4.56	Male	3.99	City	3.81
	Taiwan	3.56	Female	3.91	Rural	4.18
Price	Vietnam	3.67	Male	3.80	City	3.81
	Taiwan	3.91	Female	3.82	Rural	3.83
Conveniences	Vietnam	3.41	Male	3.53	City	3.64
	Taiwan	3.70	Female	3.62	Rural	3.50
Mood	Vietnam	3.71	Male	3.76	City	3.92
	Taiwan	3.88	Female	3.85	Rural	3.63
Sensory Appeal	Vietnam	3.96	Male	3.47	City	3.78
	Taiwan	3.60	Female	3.87	Rural	3.65
Fashion or popular	Vietnam	2.59	Male	2.52	City	2.59
	Taiwan	2.55	Female	2.59	Rural	2.52
Weight control	Vietnam	3.46	Male	2.82	City	3.12
	Taiwan	3.02	Female	3.37	Rural	3.31
Familiarity	Vietnam	2.84	Male	3.35	City	3.45
	Taiwan	3.52	Female	3.22	Rural	2.91
Ethical concern	Vietnam	4.13	Male	3.25	City	3.32
	Taiwan	2.96	Female	3.48	Rural	3.57
Brand value	Vietnam	3.04	Male	2.82	City	2.83
	Taiwan	2.70	Female	2.84	Rural	2.83
Advertising or Promotion	Vietnam	2.59	Male	2.84	City	3.11
	Taiwan	3.19	Female	3.02	Rural	2.67
Political concern	Vietnam	2.67	Male	2.32	City	2.11
	Taiwan	1.90	Female	2.13	Rural	2.35

remainders were rural (34.60%). Most of respondents' living cost for each month ranged from \$0 to \$399, just 6.54% over \$400 per month. However, more than half (50.14%) of respondents were in the \$100-\$199 per month group. In terms of amount spent for food monthly, it could be said that most participants spent from \$50 to \$149 every month (61.11%). Most of them spent from \$0 to \$300 monthly, just 4.09% over \$300 per month. 77.53 % of the Taiwanese students lived in city, which is much higher than their Vietnamese counterparts (45.71 %).

An independent samples t-test was conducted to analyze which of the two countries were presented. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perception of what factor more important in product choice of food in Vietnamese students ( $M = 3.65, SD = 0.453$ ) and Taiwanese students ( $M =$

3.52,  $SD = 0.635$ ),  $t(367) = 2.176$ ,  $p = 0.030 < 0.05$ . Therefore, null hypothesis one was rejected. Under the analysis of MANOVA, the factors (Countries) did have a significant effect ( $p < .05$ ) on the different questions. In detail, the p-values of MANOVA implied that there was a statistically significant difference between Vietnamese and Taiwanese participants who perceived more importance on keep healthy ( $p = 0.000$ ), price ( $p = 0.012$ ), convenience ( $p = 0.009$ ), sensory appeal ( $p = 0.001$ ), and weight control ( $p = 0.001$ ). However, there was no statistically significant difference in the perception of Vietnamese and Taiwanese participants who perceive more importance on satisfies basic hungry, mood, and fashion or popular.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to analyze which of the two countries was presented. Results indicated that there was a significant more important in brand choice of food in Vietnamese students ( $M = 3.054$ ,  $SD = 0.654$ ) than in Taiwanese students ( $M = 2.852$ ,  $SD = 0.738$ ),  $t(367) = 2.648$ ,  $p = 0.008 < 0.05$ . Therefore, null hypothesis two was rejected. Under the analysis of MANOVA, the factors (Countries) did have a significant effect ( $p < .05$ ) on the different questions related to the brand choice of food. In detail, the p-values of MANOVA implied that there was a statistically significant difference in the perception of Vietnamese and Taiwanese participants who perceived more importance on familiarity ( $p = 0.000$ ), ethical concern ( $p = 0.000$ ), brand value ( $p = 0.006$ ), promotion ( $p = 0.000$ ) and political concern ( $p = 0.000$ ) in food purchase decision about brand choices.

Under the analysis of two ways MANOVA, the factors (Gender and Countries) did have a significant effect ( $p < .05$ ) on the different questions. Hypothesis 3 was rejected. Participants were affected by gender and countries on perceiving the food choice. In detail, These p-values implied that There was a statistically significant difference between female and male in Vietnam and Taiwan participants who perceived more importance on the sensor appeal ( $p = 0.001$ ), weight control ( $p = 0.001$ ), average value of product choice of food ( $p = 0.034$ ) and no statistically significant difference between female and male in Vietnam and Taiwan participants who perceive more importance on satisfies basic hungry, keep healthy, price, conveniences, and mood.

The results of the multivariate tests are significant ( $p < .05$ ). It implied that factors such as Gender and Countries did have a significant effect on purchasing decision. Hypothesis 4 was rejected. Participants were affected by gender and countries on perceiving the brand choice of food. In detail, there was a statistically significant difference between female and male in Vietnam and Taiwan participants in ethical concern ( $p = 0.031$ ), brand value ( $p = 0.006$ ) and the familiarity ( $p = 0.008$ ). However, there is no statistically significant difference between female and male in Vietnam and Taiwan participants on advertisement and promotion as well as political concern. In summary, within five perceived values from brand choice of food of student consumers, gender and countries have impact on ethical concern value, brand value and the familiarity.

The factors (Residence and Countries) did have a significant effect ( $p < .05$ ) on the different questions under the analysis of two ways MANOVA. Hypothesis 5 was rejected. Participants were affected by residence and countries on perceiving the food choice. In detail, these p-values implied that there was a statistically significant difference between those lived in city or rural in Vietnam and Taiwan. The participants lived in city perceived more importance on the mood ( $p = 0.026$ ), sensory appeal ( $p = 0.016$ ), average value of product choice of food ( $p = 0.033$ ) and no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of participants who lived in city and who lived in rural on satisfies basic hungry, keep healthy, price, conveniences, and fashion. In summary, within five perceived values from product choice of food by participants, the interactions of residence and countries have impact on price ( $p = 0.017$ ) and convenience ( $p = 0.0283$ ).

The results of the multivariate tests are significant ( $p < .05$ ). It implied that factors such as Residence and Countries did have a significant effect on purchasing decision. Hypothesis 6 was rejected. Participants were affected by residence and countries on perceiving the brand choice of food. In detail, there was a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of those who lived in city and their counterparts who lived in rural on familiarity ( $p = 0.003$ ) and promotion ( $p = 0.033$ ). However, there is no statistically significant difference in the perception on ethical concern, brand value, as well as political concern.

## V. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of culture on consumer behavior by comparing consumer behavior between Vietnamese students and Taiwanese students. The findings indicated that Vietnamese students, with higher power distance and lower uncertainty avoidance than those of Taiwanese students, perceive the factors such as health, sensory appeal, weight control, ethical concern, brand value, and political concern more important in their purchasing decision on food. On the opposite, Taiwanese students, with lower power distance and higher uncertainty avoidance than those of Vietnamese students, perceive that price, convenience, familiarity, and promotion are more important in their choice. This result supported that culture has effects on food purchase decision.

The results of this research also supported that gender has a significantly statistic effect on consumption of food. Female students place more emphasis on sensory appeal, weight control and ethical concern than those of male students in food purchase decision. Within every society, it is quite common to find products that are either exclusively or strongly associated with the members of one sex. In Vietnam, for example, tea was historically male products; betel nut generally was considered female products. Despite the fact the line between "male only" and "female only" products has become blurred in recent years, consumers tend to impute a sex or gender to products. For this reason, advertising executives should consider not only the sex of their target market but also the perceived sex of the product category in the development of their advertising campaigns.

The findings also provided that students who lived in city perceived mood, sensory appeal, familiarity and promotion are more important than those who lived in rural when making food purchase decisions. There is urgent need for more systematic and conceptual cross cultural characteristics concerning the consumption habits of foreign consumers.

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