



UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOURS TOWARDS PUBLIC MARKETS AND GROCERY STORES IN TACLOBAN CITY, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract:

The Philippine government encourages consumers to buy locally produced foods to promote growth and sustainable agriculture. This will provide further economic, environmental and social benefits to farmers and local areas, leading to more sustainable patterns of consumption. This qualitative research looks at the views and behaviour of consumers in Tacloban City towards buying foods from public and private supermarkets, focusing on the barriers that prevent greater uptake local produce. Two separate focus groups (N=28) were conducted. Content analysis identified five relevant themes in relation to buying foods from public supermarket and private grocery stores. These were lifestyle, cost, food quality, food choices and environment. Participants reported buying their foods and food products mostly from the local public supermarket with the cost, food quality and food choices as factors influencing them to do so. The main barriers preventing participants from buying from local public supermarkets are the dirty environment and inconvenience. The results of the study are useful in developing future strategies for encouraging people to buy more from the local public supermarkets increasing consumption of local produce.

Keywords: Qualitative; Public Market; Focus Group; Consumer Behaviour; Food Choice.

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1. Introduction

In the past, most of the food that we purchase was sold in the public market where small local retailers or outlets and small farmers from the neighbouring villages are selling their produce. However, as cities become bigger and highly urbanized, large shopping malls and supermarkets of retail giants start coming in. This phenomenon is observable in many different cities in the Philippines. The trend of rapid popularity of supermarkets has also been observed in cities of other developing countries (Traill, 2006). This has happened in response to a number of forces, many of them interconnected: rising incomes, urbanisation, more female participation in the labour force

(increased opportunity cost of time) and the desire to emulate Western culture. In recent years, most developing countries have moved towards liberalisation of trade and investment which has brought the global supermarket chains into the scene, together with buyer power in purchasing and supply chain management skills. The local public market is usually the place where small farmers are selling their produce but the entry of these grocery stores from the country's retail giants has somehow reduced buyers from the local markets. Although supermarkets are selling an increasing amount of local foods, still the majority of their products continue to be nationally produced or imported. In UK, local and regional food products currently accounts for only a fraction of the sale of its food and drink, with only six percent of all food sales produced regionally (Defra, 2003).

In past few years, the Philippine government has encouraged the increase production and consumption of local food products as part of its agriculture sustainability plan (Faylon and Cardona, 2007). According to Defra (2003), food consumed closer to its point of production has the potential to provide economic, environmental and social benefits in relation to sustainable consumption at the local level. Previous studies conducted in UK by Chambers, Lobb, Butler and Traill (2007) revealed that consumers are generally positive about locally produced foods. They further reported that, although consumers were buying few local products currently, there was widespread enthusiasm across socio-economic groups for local foods, with consumers perceiving them as being of a higher quality than imported foods found in chains of supermarkets. Consumers feel that by buying local produce they are purchasing products that are more authentic and higher quality (Boyle, 2003; Lee, 2000), as well as fresher (LaTrobe, 2001), more nutritious, tasty and safe (Seyfang, 2004). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate consumer buying behaviours towards public supermarkets and grocery stores in big malls. In particular, the study seeks to understand the reasons why consumers prefer to buy foods from the local public market while others at the grocery stores of supermalls.

2. Methodology

Previous studies conducted particularly those by Chamber et al. (2007) and Traill (2006) which examined variations in consumer preferences between local, national and imported foods showed that qualitative focus group approach is most appropriate in understanding consumer perceptions and behaviours that is why this study adopted similar approach. Focus groups are particularly suited to understanding complex behaviours such as food choice because they encourage participants to query and explain themselves to each other (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). With this, they will allow us to explore not only what consumers prefer, but also the reasons for their preferences, and any difficulty that they report in achieving their goals. Furthermore, the interactions among the participants during the focus groups will also provide valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity of opinions among them.

Recruitment

Two focus groups were held at the Home Arts Entrepreneurship Unit of Leyte Normal University (LNU) in January 2016, with a total of 28 participants. The focus groups were conducted on different days considering the nature of participants (students and housewives). Recruitment was carried out on Cafeteria and Bakeshop practicum students of LNU (22) and on several housewives (6). All respondents were residents of Tacloban City. Authors screened respondents for demographic information, including gender, age, occupation and number of children. Incentives

were provided to each participant for his/her time. Participants were told that their participation in the study focus group is voluntary. The recruitment procedure resulted to a gender imbalance with 24 women and 4 men. However, given that females tend to carry out the household shopping this was not seen as problematic. 6 of the 28 participants had children under the age of 16. Finally, most of the participants belong to the age group 18–45 year olds, as it seemed possible that their attitudes towards buying foods from public markets or private grocery stores might be different to older participants.

Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based primarily on a review of the existing literature. The protocol was designed to explore participants' attitudes towards buying foods from the local public market and from grocery stores in shopping malls, their views on the attitudes of other people, and the extent to which they felt that they had control over what they bought. The protocol began by establishing a shared understanding of foods sold at the local public market (local and regionally produced foods) and private grocery stores like in big malls (nationally produced and imported foods) within each group. The protocol then moved on to a range of open-ended questions to be addressed during the course of each interview concerning attitudes towards buying foods from the local public market and grocery stores in shopping malls, as well as questions regarding the views of friends, family and society in general towards buying local foods. Questions that aimed to identify any barriers to buying more from local public market were also included, as was a question on cost.

Procedure

Each group was moderated by the same interviewer to ensure consistency in interviewing style. Notes were taken to ensure that participants could be identified during transcription. Each group lasted for approximately 90 minutes, and was tape recorded and later transcribed. The aim of the project was explained to the participants, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality were given. Brief introductions were made by each of the participants and also the moderator. The focus group protocol was comprehensive, but fairly broad in scope. This allowed participants to discuss the areas they felt most strongly about in the greatest depth.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The first author independently coded the data. Information was classified, tabulated and summarized according to related themes and categories that are reoccurring and overlapping. Interpretative and basic analysis was used to decipher from the extracts of data transcripts the informative and hidden important messages during each interview. The main reasons for consumers to buy foods from the local public supermarkets or from grocery stores in big malls were summarized and interpreted by the researcher from interviewees' opinions related on the major themes identified as well as from the recommendations made.

3. Findings

Five key themes were present in each of the two groups. These were price, lifestyle, food quality, choice and support local farmers. Before the interview, respondents were encouraged to think of different foods that they usually find and buy from the public supermarkets and from grocery stores

in shopping malls. This was an important ‘ice breaking’ technique, and also ensured that participants understood what was meant by foods from the two different markets. Moreover, the exercise also served to allow participants to define the parameters of the discussion themselves, rather than being influenced by the moderator. Overall, it was agreed that foods from the local public supermarkets are those that are produced locally and within the region while foods from the grocery stores in supermalls include national and imported products.

Price

One of the most prominent themes was price. All respondents believed that local public market provides cheaper foods than the grocery stores in big malls.

“The best thing in buying foods from the local public market is that you can bargain for the price. Unlike in the grocery stores, their prices are fix and can’t be haggled” [Male, student, no children, 19]

“Being a *suki* (old regular client) you can be given a cheaper price. Unlike in grocery stores there is no such thing as *suki*” [Female, working, married, with children, 40]

“Foods from the public markets are cheaper because local farmers don’t spend much on the transportation of their produce to the market since their farm is located near the city” [Female, working, married, with children, 36]

“I think foods from grocery stores in malls are expensive. I believe locally produced food is inexpensive. But I’ve never compared them. [Female, working, no children, 42]

“In the public market we have the market day or *tabo*, it is when farmers from the nearby villages sell their fresh produce at a very low price” [Male, student, 19]

The general equation that cheaper foods sold are at the local public market is opposite to the results of the study conducted by Chamber et al. (2007). In UK, local foods sold at public supermarkets are perceived to be more expensive compared to national and imported foods. Result also suggests that attitudes towards the price of food from both public supermarkets and private grocery stores were based upon their experiences and perceptions of food prices. Women were more likely to describe the cost of food in terms of their own shopping experiences since they usually do the price bargaining compared to men.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle emerged as a theme through aggregating a number of related themes—most notably time, available parking space, security, convenience and availability of transportation. Many participants felt that although it would be an enjoyable and worthy experience to shop at the local public market, they could not do this on a routine basis due to lack of time and opportunity and no parking spaces.

“I shop in the supermarket in malls because it’s more convenient, but I do try to go to the market in the City” [Female, student, no children, 20]

“Malls provide shoppers parking spaces making it more convenient. It is also quicker to shop at malls because of the many cashier counters they provide” [Female, working, married, with children, 42]

“I go to the grocery stores because it is air-conditioned, clean and safe. I can also shop for clothes and watch movies there” [Female, student, not married, no children, 19]

“I usually go to the big grocery stores in Tacloban if I want to buy food supplies especially after work or in the evening. I feel safe at the grocery stores than in the public market” [Female, working, married, with children, 42]

Nevertheless, one participant said it is more convenient for her to buy from the public market since the place is only a ride away from their house.

However, although majority see malls as a mean for convenience in buying needed supplies, some see it as an indicator of the varying social strata in Tacloban City. People who buy from grocery stores in malls are believed to be well-off in the society. Moreover, some respondents showed concerns on the immergence of big retail supermalls for they might drive smaller retailer especially those found in public supermarkets out of business. The same concerns were expressed by consumers in UK regarding the effects of private grocery stores on the survival of the local retailers in public markets (Chamber et al., 2007).

“It’s a pity seeing fewer customers going to the public market these days. Unlike before, when these retail supermarkets were not around, Tacloban public market was full of people” [Female, working, married, with children, 52]

Food Quality

Foods that are sold at the local public market are believed to be better quality in terms of freshness compared to those at the private supermarkets.

“I buy fish and vegetables from Tacloban Public Market because they are very fresh. The fish from the grocery store are not fresh maybe because the fish sold are not coming from local fishermen” [Female, working, married, with children, 43]

“I know where the vegetables sold at the local market are coming from. I know that they are fresh” [Male, student, not married, no children, 19]

Distance from the producers or source of products and being *suki* were factors mentioned in relation to food quality. Moreover, female respondents were more concerned on food quality than males. However, all groups believed that foods sold from the local public markets are fresher than the grocery stores. Collectively, these findings were consistent with previous findings by Chamber et al., 2007 and Boyle, 2003)

Product Choice

There seem to be a clear preference among the participants in terms on the food items they are buying. For canned goods, processed meats, condiments and other preserved foods, majority of

the respondents prefer to purchase them at the department stores, while for vegetables, meat and fish are commonly purchased from the local public market.

“In terms of grocery items such as canned goods, pastas and processed meat like *tocino* and hotdogs, I prefer to buy them at grocery store in big malls because they have many brands to choose from” [Female, working, married, with children, 45]

“I buy fish, vegetables and seafoods from the public market because we can choose the freshest. It’s just nice to have a choice, it is to our advantage too.” [Female, student, not married, no children, 19]

“There are many stores and vendors you can choose from in the public market. You can compare which of them offers the lowest price” [Female, student, not married, no children, 20]

“When I go to the grocery stores to buy house supplies, I also buy my food supplies there. I usually buy meat such as pork and chicken from the grocery stores.” [Female, working, married, with children, 45]

Having the market day or *tabo* was also mentioned by some of the participants on why they go to the public market due to the many product choices available during this event. However, the researchers consider such behaviour of going to the market day more of price or cost driven rather than the food choices available.

Support local farmers

The last theme to immerge from the focus group discussions is the concern on the local farmers particularly those supplying commodities to the public market. The recent issues in territorial disputes involving the Philippines and its neighbouring countries have driven more Filipino consumers to be enthusiastic towards local products and showing concerns to the local farmers.

“Buying from the public market directly from the farmers makes me feel helping them. There are many ways we can improve the lives of our local farmers and one of which is buying from the local public market” [Female, working, married, with children, 43]

“Buying foods or products from other countries could put our local farmers out of business. In these times, we have to support our local industries. If I have a choice to buy from two products in which one is from local producer, I will buy the locally produced” [Female, student, not married, no children, 19].

All age groups showed positive support to local farmers believing that it was good to help them in every possible way.

4. Discussions

There was a preference for buying from the local public market and grocery store in shopping malls. Highly perishable foods like meat and vegetables are commonly purchased from the local public market while semi-perishable goods like canned goods, pasta, condiments and processed

foods are bought from the grocery stores in malls. There was a perception that foods sold at the public market are cheaper and fresher than those sold at the grocery stores. Inconvenience and lifestyle are the barriers that prevent some consumers from buying from the public market. Despite the difference in prices and quality, and concern for the local farmers, still there is an observable increase in consumers patronizing the supermarkets in big malls. Convenience such as provision of parking spaces, clean and safe environment, and the changing lifestyle of consumers are the driving forces behind this shift towards big malls. Although consumers understand the potential social and economic benefits in changing their buying behaviour towards the local public market, these benefits do not currently overcome the barriers they have to face to achieve these changes.

Marketing Implications

With the superior freshness and cheaper price of goods sold at the public market and the strong feeling of support towards the local farmers, a good marketing strategy would be to improve the shopping experiences in the public market. These may include providing decent parking spaces, security guards, clean and sanitary environment. The same strategy has been used by leading meat shops today, instead of putting their store in the public market, they opted to build their own shop, providing parking space, safe, clean and air-conditioned environment for the customers. As the focus group suggest, most customers are willing to pay more for convenience. However, the strategy of improving the shopping experience in the public market will lack impact if the local government will not support such move. In the Philippines, maintaining the condition of the public market is the responsibility of the local government, this being one of the services they provide to the community. The shift of consumers towards big malls should indicate that immediate attention should be given by the city to the local public market. Results of the focus group also suggest that there is strong concern towards the local farmers from the consumers. Thus, a potential marketing strategy could be to appeal a sense of patriotism and promoting local pride. Local farmers sell their produce at the public market hence local government should promote the patronage of the public market emphasizing the benefits to the local economy.

5. Conclusion

Based on the focus group discussion, five themes appeared to have influenced consumer buying behaviour towards. These are price, lifestyle, food quality, product choice and support for local farmers. The main barriers preventing participants from buying from the local public supermarkets are lifestyle related such as dirty environment, security and inconvenience. The results of the study are useful in developing future strategies for encouraging people to buy more from the local public supermarkets hence increasing consumption of local produce. Possible marketing strategies for the local government are to improve the shopping experiences in the public market and appeal to consumers a sense of patriotism to encourage the patronage of local products.

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