

What Drives Food Choices Amongst Low, Middle and High Income People In Urban South Africa?

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Abstract

Income level is a strong determinant of food choice. Despite personal and household food preferences, financial means tend to govern food choice, yet diet-related diseases occur across all income levels. The purpose of this work was to holistically explore and compare food choice drivers of low (LI), middle (MI) and high (HI) income people living in urban South Africa (SA). Here, 13 focus group (FG) discussions (six LI, n = 36, 67% female; four MI, n = 22, 100% female and three HI, n = 17, 76% female) were held in two cities. The questions leading the discussions were based on prior food choice related research done in African countries. The recordings were transcribed, and each driver mentioned (e.g., “good taste”) was coded inductively and deductively. A total of 17 categories, each representing a broader group of food choice drivers, emerged. Eight of them were unique to this study and not yet reported in other African studies e.g., food waste and availability of food and resources. Several categories were important to all income groups, e.g., sensory appeal, health, and food safety. The importance of other categories varied by income group, e.g., social aspects and social media were of a greater influence to MI and HI than to LI participants. When it comes to concern for ethics and the environment; HI cared more about the environment, MI cared more about employment equity of the shops they buy from and LI expressed little to no concern for either, although they often reused their food packaging and were the least likely to waste food. The research increases understanding of food choice motives in South Africa and their differences under varying economic conditions. It also highlights opportunities and limitations for improved food choice strategies that may support public health and the planet.

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Nomzamo is a food scientist with a special interest in the way consumers interact with food. She holds a MSc Food Science degree (cum laude) from the University of Pretoria and is currently pursuing a PhD Food Science degree from there as well. She has two years’ worth of experience working in the food industry as a product development technologist. Nomzamo is a published author of one journal article and has co-authored two.