



Molly Hammar, Rebecca Hannon, and Rachel Rogers
Bradley University Undergraduates
Dr. Nina Collins and Dr. Kevin Randall
Bradley University Mentors

KEYWORDS: cookware, consumer choice, healthy cooking, household products, cooking,

Acknowledgements: This project was supported by a Special Emphasis Grant for undergraduate student/faculty collaborative research from Bradley University and by the Healthy Gourmet Cookware Company.

Abstract

This study employed a focus group of thirteen mid-western university students ages 20-25 to test the hypothesis that after observing a demonstration using high-end stainless steel cookware, college student participants would exhibit a greater propensity to purchase the cookware than prior to the session. Questions regarding cookware choices were asked before and after the guided demonstration. Results confirmed that a guided demonstration of high-end, stainless steel cookware increased the likelihood of future purchase.

Influences on Cookware Choices of Young Adults

Introduction

“Since when did having a kitchen require a degree in health and safety?” writes Catherine Allchin (2006) in her Seattle Times article, “Playing it safe: With concerns over the health risks of cookware, it’s worth stewing over some options.” When consumers “stew” over the purchase of new cookware, what ingredients motivate their choices? This study reviewed the available literature focusing on factors influencing consumer cookware choices and investigated the influence of an educational demonstration on young adult consumer cookware choice by employing focus groups,

Factors Influencing Consumer Cookware Choices

Our search for literature reviewing cookware trends sent us beyond the traditional social sciences resources.¹ Gender, income, the housing market boom of the past decade, advertising and promotion, cookware composition, and innovative

technological designs were found to influence cookware consumption. For example, one study found that increased sales resulted from marketing efforts that focus on education, such as classes on how to use types of cookware and cooking lessons (Mintel, 2005, Market Drivers). That consumers have a preference according to the composition of cookware was demonstrated by the rapid growth of stainless steel cookware sales between 2003 and 2005 (Mintel, 2005, Market Segmentation); stainless steel has become the preferred choice of many gourmet kitchens, thus attracting consumer interest. Even with an expensive price tag, sales rose more rapidly for stainless steel cookware relative to other cookware materials. Our review also revealed that single people also looked for convenience options such as fast food, frozen, or pre-cooked products; this affects what type of cookware is needed in the food preparation process. Childless consumers with an income greater than \$50,000 a year were more likely to cook from scratch and less likely to use pre-cooked or frozen foods (Mintel, 2005, Market Factors). Not surprisingly high-income households were found to be more likely to spend money on high quality kitchen tools, including cookware.

In sum, we were able to find literature supporting consumer preference of stainless steel cookware, especially when the product had been adequately demonstrated. Childless couples, with a higher than average income, were most likely to purchase such cookware; however, we did not find information regarding factors influencing cookware choices of young adults. This study addresses the gap in the research literature regarding cookware choices of childless young adults in order to inform higher-end, stainless steel cookware manufacturers of market position possibilities.

Research Hypothesis

Based upon our review of the literature we hypothesized that after observing a demonstration using high-end stainless steel cookware, college student participants would exhibit a greater propensity to purchase the cookware than prior to the session. The objective of this research was to use a focus group to explore influences of cookware choices among young adults aged 20-25 years at a private, Midwestern university. The hypothesis was that after observing a demonstration using high-end cookware there would be a greater propensity to purchase the cookware.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Prior to recruitment, the study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. Thirteen Midwestern university students (three males and ten females), between 20-25 years of age, were recruited via website announcement and a university weekly publication. Participants came to the Family and Consumer Sciences Foods Lab on a prescribed date where each read and signed a written explanation of the study and informed consent document. This study employed focus groups to address the research hypothesis. A focus group approach both has

limitations and benefits in conducting research (Gibbs, 1997). Regarding limitations, one drawback of a focus group is how to recognize an individual's point of view versus the group's view; disadvantages include less control over a group than over an individual interview and observer dependency that occurs when the discussion moderator influences the participants by being involved in the discussion. However, benefits of a focus group include the ability to help the researchers gain insight into others' understanding. Another benefit to focus groups is the possibility for change between the initial and final discussion; there is a high probability of change in the views of the participants. Following a focus group, the focus group's moderator(s) should be able to critically understand what is driving the participants' opinions related to a certain topic. Thus, based upon our study's purpose, the authors decided that the benefits of a focus group approach outweighed the possible limitations, especially when we worked diligently to mitigate the disadvantages described above.

Prior to the start of the focus group, each participant completed a pre-focus group survey concerning food preparation interest and experience. Interest in food preparation was rated by the participants on a Likert-type scale with responses from 0 (*no interest in cooking*) to 5 (*extremely interested in cooking*). The groups followed a prescribed format including the following steps: opening, discussion, cooking demonstration, and wrap-up (see Appendix A and B). Discussion groups of six and seven participants were formed and led by a moderator; the group discussions were taped. After group discussion, the participants observe a guided cooking demonstration given by the company nutritionist. The demonstration included information about the advantages of waterless cookware, including health, convenience, and taste. The participants sampled the food and answered additional questions.

Results

Pre-Focus Group Survey

A pre-focus group survey indicated that all of the participants were at least fairly interested in cooking (a score of 3 or above); 38% or five out of 13 were extremely interested in cooking.

Focus Group Responses

Cooking Frequency and Tools. Cooking was defined as "preparing food with the use of some type of cookware (e.g., pot, pan, slow-cooker, baking dish)." Nine of the 13 participants stated that they cook at least five times per week. The main meal cooked was dinner; breakfast was cooked sometimes. Ingredients and tools used in cooking included whatever is "on hand," a George Foreman grill, pasta, and fresh ingredients (vegetables and spices).

Reasons for Cooking. The participants stated they cook because of the high cost of eating out. Many reported not having time for elaborate cooking and only spending

15-30 minutes on food preparation, using frozen ingredients and/or pre-prepared foods (e.g., Hamburger Helper or Skillet Sensations). According to the participants, cooking in a house is easier than cooking in a sorority/fraternity, apartment, or dorm, and more cooking would be done if one had “ownership” of a kitchen.

Current Cookware Owned. Several of the participants stated that they had hand-me-down cookware from their parents or grandparents. One female participant said, “I’ve never had to buy any cookware because my mom gives me all of her old, run-down stuff. None of my pots match, but at least I have something to cook with!” Two participants said that they bought the cheapest set of cookware available and will only use it during their time in college, after which they will “upgrade” to a nicer set.

Future Cookware Choices. All of the participants indicated interest in “upgrading” their current cookware after graduation. One female participant said that she did not want non-stick cookware because of health concerns and her fiancé said he would rather spend extra time cleaning an inexpensive, non-non-stick pot/pan than spending the extra money on non-stick cookware. All of the participants also stated that they would register for cookware on bridal registries. If cookware was put on a bridal registry, the participants were more likely to choose a pricier set of cookware than if they were purchasing cookware for themselves.

Cookware Price. The price that the participants were willing to pay for the cookware before viewing the cooking demonstration generally ranged from \$50-\$250. Several of the female participants stated that they would spend \$100-\$200 on a “nice,” 7-10 piece set of cookware. Most of the participants did not have jobs and could not consider spending a large amount of money on cookware. After the cooking demonstration performed by the cookware’s nutritionist, the participants were again asked how much they would spend on cookware. About 50% of the participants said that they would purchase a set of the cookware modeled for \$1500-\$2000 because of the live cooking demonstration. Seeing the cookware in action and hearing about its benefits increased the participants’ likelihood to buy such a higher-quality cookware.

Discussion

During the focus group discussion on what influences cookware choices of young adults, appearance, price, brand loyalty, understanding of cookware and cooking, experiences in cooking, cooking skills, frequency of cooking, the effect of marriage on cooking, technology, and composition of cookware were examined. Prior to the cooking demonstration, the participants stated that they would spend on average \$50-\$250 on cookware. Following the discussion, cooking demonstration, and food sampling, over half of the participants indicated they would purchase high-end cookware priced at \$1500-\$2000. This indicated a significant change in what price participants were willing to pay after seeing a live cooking demonstration using higher-end stainless steel cookware.

Based upon the findings, it is suggested that further research be conducted for engaged couples. Because the findings suggested that young people would be more willing to buy more expensive, higher-end cookware if they were to sign up for a bridal registry, it is suggested that influences of cookware choices under those circumstances be further studied. Quantitative research with an adequately sized, representative sample could provide statistically meaningful data for cookware manufacturers. In addition, influences found in the existing literature related to household size in particular, cookware choices at different stages in the lifecycle could be further explored through focus group methodology. Additional research could also explore gender differences in cookware choices.

In general, the focus groups' findings paralleled trends observed in the literature. In particular our study extended that literature to childless young adults in college. A guided demonstration of high-end stainless steel cookware directly influenced participants' willingness to purchase. These findings may help high-end cookware companies to better position themselves in the market for young college graduates under the age of 25.

Footnote

1Mintel, a global market analyst, publishes market research to assist businesses in achieving their goals and produces some 600 reports into European, UK-specific and US consumer markets every year. Subscribers to this source are able to search for relevant publications by category, allowing them to examine all related reports across all markets. The references and citations used in this paper refer to these categories as found by Mintel International Group Limited and retrieved through our University's library from <http://reports.mintel.com/>

Appendix A

Focus Group Schedule

- 3:00-3:15 p.m.: Introduction of investigators and brief overview of the focus group.
- 3:15-3:45 p.m.: Participants were split into two groups. One group of six and one group of seven. The first set of questions was asked (Appendix B).
- 3:45-4:20 p.m.: Group will meet together in BR65. Kathleen Eberhardt and the student investigators will present a cooking demonstration to illustrate high-end cookware. The menu will consist of chicken,

vegetables, rice, dinner roll, pineapple upside-down cake, and beverage.

- 4:20-4:50 p.m.: Group will get a small dinner meal and will discuss the second set of questions (Appendix B).
- 4:50-5:00 p.m.: Closing remarks. Question/Answer as needed. Distribution of gift cards, thanking participants for their involvement and discussion.

Appendix B

First set of Questions Asked by Moderators

- Do you cook? Do you like to cook? How often do you cook?
 - Do you foresee yourself cooking with your future spouse?
 - What kinds of food do you prepare? How long do you spend cooking?
 - What factors do you consider when you cook? (Convenience, health, equipment needed, etc.)
 - Have you ever purchased cookware?
 - Have you included cookware in your bridal registry?
 - What qualities do you look for in cookware? Do these qualities match your aims of cooking?
 - Do things such as design, color, or functionality influence your decision to purchase cookware?
 - Do you watch cooking shows on TV? If yes, does this influence your cooking habits?
 - What is your price-range for cookware? What is the top price you would pay for cookware?
 - Do you think cookware is “worth” spending a lot of money on?
1. Do you know the technology in cookware (induction cooking, waterless cooking, etc.)?

Second set of Questions Asked by Moderators

- Do you like the food?
- Do you plan on cooking together after marriage? Who do you foresee doing most of the cooking?
- Do you think there is benefit in purchasing/registering for high-end cookware, such as Healthy Gourmet?
- Would you consider purchasing high-end cookware after seeing the demonstration?
- Can you see yourself purchasing high-end cookware later in life?

References

Allchin, C. M. (2006, November 26). Playing it safe: With concerns over the health risks of cookware, it's worth stewing over some options. *The Seattle Times*. Retrieved May 23, 2007, from LexisNexis Academic database.

Gibbs, A. (1997). Focus Groups. *Social Research Update*, 19. Retrieved January 30, 2007, from <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU10.html>

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Advertising and Promotion. Cookware-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Future and Forecast. Cookware-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Market Drivers. Cooking-US.

Mintel Reports. (May 2005). Market Factors. Cooking-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Market Segmentation. Cookware-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Retail Distribution. Cookware-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). Supply Structure. Cookware-US.

Mintel Reports. (October 2005). The Consumer. Cookware-US.

