
Cross-Cultural Determinants of Healthy Food Choice: Domestic and International Students in South Korea

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Abstract: Cross-cultural work on food choice has expanded considerably over the past few decades; however, studies that compare East Asian student groups are still relatively low. This study compared the food choice motivations of Chinese (N = 105) and Korean (N = 92) university students living in Korea by using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). Data were analyzed with a 2 (culture: Chinese × Korean) × 2 (sex: male × female) factorial ANOVA. The result shows a significant difference between Korean students and Chinese students in terms of health as one of the main effects of culture, where Korean students rated it higher than their Chinese peers (Mean difference = 0.45; $F(1, 193) = 28.20$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$, a large effect). Sex demonstrated significant main effects across six distinct factors, specifically, natural content, price, ethical concern, religion, familiarity, and weight control with men consistently exhibiting higher scores than women in each instance. Mood, convenience, and sensory appeal each showed a significant culture-by-sex interaction. Collectively, these findings appear to suggest a discernible role for culture and gender as joint determinants in the approach to dietary selections among university students within this East Asian context.

Keywords: China, cross-cultural, food choice questionnaire, food choice, gender, Korea, university students.

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INTRODUCTION

Dietary behavior represents one of the most significant modifiable determinants of long-term health outcomes. Suboptimal dietary patterns have been consistently associated with an increased risk of non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and various forms of cancer (World Health Organization, 2020). Although physiological needs partially regulate food consumption, individuals' dietary choices are influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, social, cultural, and economic factors (Arganini, Saba, Comitato, Virgili, & Turrini, 2012; Conner & Armitage, 2002).



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University students represent a particularly important group for studying dietary behavior in this context. Entering higher education marks the first stage for many young adults, at which they assume primary responsibility for their food choices (Harker, Sharma, Harker, & Reinhard, 2010). Research consistently indicates that students tend to follow dietary patterns high in fat and energy-dense foods while consuming inadequate amounts of vegetables, fruits, and dietary fiber (Falconet, Iltis, & Iltis, 2025; Lowry et al., 2000; McKinney, 2013; Zigmont & Bulmer, 2015). These patterns are further worsened by academic stress, financial constraints, and time limitations, which together contribute negatively to long-term health outcomes (Peterson, Duncan, Null, Roth, & Gill, 2010). It is important to note that these trends are not confined to Western populations but have also been observed across diverse Asian contexts (El Ansari, Stock, & Mikolajczyk, 2012; Sakamaki, Toyama, Amamoto, Liu, & Shinfuku, 2005).

Among the various factors that determine food choice, one of the most widely recognized influences is culture (Rozin, 1996). Culture influences not only taste preferences but also culinary practices, eating rituals, and the symbolic meanings attached to food, often functioning beyond conscious awareness (Shiraev & Levy, 2013). Despite sharing close geographical proximity and historical interactions, Korea and China have developed distinct culinary traditions. Korean cuisine, which is deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy, emphasizes both the aesthetic presentation of meals and health-promoting properties (Chung, Yang, Shin, & Chung, 2016). On the other hand, Chinese food culture is strongly influenced by Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which emphasizes the therapeutic and balancing functions of food (Dang, 2014; Kocak, Kocyigit, & Ozbek, 2026; Weng, 1998).

Additionally, in dietary behavior, gender represents an important moderating factor, where evidence suggests that women generally exhibit greater health consciousness in their food choices and are more likely to view food as a means of weight management (Arganini et al., 2012; Beardsworth et al., 2002). On the contrary, men tend to focus on foods that are energy-dense and are comparatively less attentive to nutritional considerations (Wardle et al., 2004). Because these differences do not hold uniformly from one culture to the next, examining gender across cultures can be especially revealing (Aboueldahab, Vanutelli, D'Addario, & Steca, 2026; Cowan, Budzynski-Seymour, Dodd-Reynolds, & Pearce, 2023).

The present study sits within a growing body of work that uses the FCQ (Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995) to probe cross-cultural differences in food choice motives. The instrument has been applied to European, North American, and several Asian samples (Januszewska, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2011; Markovina et al., 2015; Pearcey & Zhan, 2018; Prescott, Young, O'Neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002), but direct comparisons of Chinese and Korean students who actually live in Korea are hard to find. We address that gap by studying two culturally related but distinct East Asian student groups in the same country (South Korea), an arrangement that holds constant some environmental confounds, such as what food is available and what it costs.

The dietary habits of young adults have been greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Marty, Lefrançois, Nicklaus, & Monnery-Patris, 2021) and by the increasing impact of social media on food environments (Deng, Li, & Wang, 2022; Islam & Sheikh, 2024). These factors were not directly examined in the present study and are cited only as background motivating further cross-cultural research.

Factors Associated with Food Choice

Food choice is a multidetermined behavior, the product of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors acting together (Arganini et al., 2012). On the biological side, the sensory properties of food taste, smell, and texture weigh heavily on what people prefer (Clark, 1998; Steiner, 1977). But these intrinsic qualities are only part of the story. Choices are also pulled by non-sensory considerations: expectations and attitudes about food (Rozin, 1996; Shepherd, 1989), health claims, price, ethical questions such as environmental sustainability (Sparks, Shepherd, & Frewer, 1995), and the eater's mood at the moment (Rogers, 1996).

Steptoe et al. (1995) systematized the diverse range of influences on food choice into nine underlying constructs, operationalized through the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ): health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern. Since its development, the FCQ has been extensively validated and applied across a wide range of cultural contexts (Januszewska et al., 2011; Markovina et al., 2015; Prescott et al., 2002), supporting its suitability for cross-cultural research. More recent

studies have extended its application to student populations in the Middle East, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012; Torres-Moreno, Tarrega, Torrescasana, & Blanch, 2024), further demonstrating its broad cross-cultural relevance and applicability. However, it is not appropriate to assume that the FCQ is cross-culturally stable. A similar observation has been asserted by Fotopoulos, Krystallis, Vassallo, and Pagiaslis (2009). The researcher observed that the initial nine-factor solution did not always replicate, suggesting the model be refined. Januszewska et al. (2011) reexamined the instrument across four nations and questioned whether it assesses the same constructs in every context. Strict equivalence of the factor structure between these two East Asian groups cannot be assumed because, to our knowledge, the FCQ has not undergone formal measurement-invariance testing (configural, metric, and scalar) comparing Chinese and Korean populations explicitly. Therefore, reliability was assessed separately for each sample in the current investigation (Section 2.2). The absence of formal invariance testing is acknowledged as a limitation, and group comparisons are interpreted cautiously.

Although the FCQ is used widely, it does not fully capture emerging determinants of food choice. Contemporary shifts such as increasing adoption of plant-based diets, greater concern for sustainability, and rising health literacy among younger people have added new dimensions that were not included in the instrument's original design (Graça, Godinho, & Truninger, 2019; Kim & Oh, 2025). Therefore, some scholars recommended that revised versions of the FCQ should explicitly incorporate sustainability and environmental impact as one of the distinct motivational constructs, especially considering their increasing salience in East Asian consumer contexts (Verain, Dagevos, & Antonides, 2015).

Cross-Cultural Differences in Food Choice

Rozin (1996) posits that culture is a dominant influence on food preferences, a view broadly supported by comparative research across diverse national contexts. For instance, considering East–West differences in social behavior, including dietary practices, cross-cultural scholars have frequently employed the individualism–collectivism framework (Hofstede, 1980). From this perspective, Asian cultures, characterized by collectivist orientations and high-context communication, tend to place food within broader social, relational, and symbolic frameworks. In contrast, in individualistic Western cultures, it is more likely that food is treated in utilitarian terms, emphasizing function over social or symbolic meaning (Markus & Kitayama, 2014; Monin & Szczurek, 2014).

Despite sharing a close geographical proximity, a shared Confucian heritage and have been engaging in centuries of cultural exchange, there is a notable difference in culinary traditions between China and Korea. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a strong influence on Chinese food culture, which assigns therapeutic and health-maintaining properties to foods and emphasizes balancing Yin and Yang (Dang, 2014; Kocak et al., 2026; Weng, 1998). Moreover, in China food serves an important social functions, which act as a medium for building relationships and expressing social status (Ma, 2015). However, in Korean food culture, which is shaped by long-standing Confucian social norms emphasizes both aesthetic presentation and health-oriented dietary practices (Chung et al., 2016). It is also found that there is a stark difference in consumer concerns related to food systems: in China for instance, repeated food safety incidents have heightened public sensitivity to issues of quality and origin (BeAmazed, 2024; Kang, 2019; Stanway, 2016) contrary to this, in Korea, consumers show strong engagement with labeling schemes, including organic certification and country-of-origin information (Kim, Nayga, & Capps, 2014).

Comparative studies that employ the FCQ reveal several patterns across cultural contexts consistently. Across populations in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, constructs such as familiarity and ethical concern generally rank among the least influential factors in food choice (Markovina et al., 2015; Pearcey & Zhan, 2018; Prescott et al., 2002). On the contrary, sensory appeal is consistently identified as a dominant determinant, especially among European cohorts and increasingly among Asian populations, which is influenced by the globalization of food culture (Crossley & Nazir, 2002; McKenna, Thurecht, Swanepoel, Blair, & Pelly, 2025; Sushma et al., 2014). Regardless of cultural background, recent systematic evidence supports this trend, demonstrating that sensory attributes continue to be among the main drivers of food selection for university students around the world (Torres-Moreno et al., 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption to food choice patterns around the world. Research conducted during and post pandemic shows notable shifts in university students' dietary behaviors, which include more home cooking, increased interest in foods seen as supporting immunity, and greater attention to where food comes from and its safety. These changes are especially relevant when interpreting data from Chinese students, given the significant scale of pandemic-related disruption in China and evidence of measurable effects on the dietary intake and quality of Chinese college students during this period.

Gender Differences in Food Choice

Gender influences food choice with some consistency across cultures. Compared with men, women generally place more emphasis on the health attributes of food, hold back more in their eating, and engage more often in weight control (Arganini et al., 2012; Beardsworth et al., 2002). Studies from a range of countries report the same thing: women eat more fruit and vegetables and voice greater concern about food and health than men do (El Ansari et al., 2012; Lim, Yoo, & Kim, 2020; Lowry et al., 2000; Share & Stewart-Knox, 2012).

These gender patterns are not the same everywhere, though. Culture conditions how gender plays out in food-related behavior (Aboueldahab et al., 2026). Pearcey and Zhan (2018), for instance, found that American women scored well above American men on mood-influenced eating, yet the same gap simply did not appear among Chinese participants. (Cowan et al., 2023) reached a similar conclusion more recently, showing that the size and even the direction of gender effects depend heavily on context, with urban-rural and socioeconomic differences shaping the picture among Chinese young adults.

There are signs, too, that gender norms and body-image ideals pushed along by social media are starting to rework food choice among young adults in East Asia (Dang, 2014; Li, Zhang, & Zhong, 2022). A growing strand of research on male-directed health and fitness marketing in Korea and China hints that young men there may now pay closer attention to protein intake, weight management, and natural food content than earlier gender analyses would have predicted (Oh & Park, 2023).

Research Hypotheses

Drawing on the theory and evidence set out above, and following the FCQ framework that (Steptoe et al., 1995) established and that has since been reproduced across many cultural settings (Januszewska et al., 2011; Markovina et al., 2015; Pearcey & Zhan, 2018; Prescott et al., 2002), we formulated the following hypotheses.

H₁: The health factor is positively related to food consumption intention for both Korean and Chinese students.

H₂: Mood condition is positively related to food consumption intention for both groups, with potential cultural moderation of this effect.

H₃: Convenience is positively related to consumption intention for both Korean and Chinese students, though the strength of this relationship may differ based on students' living arrangements and financial independence.

H₄: Sensory appeal of food is positively related to consumption intention for both groups.

H₅: Natural content of food is positively related to consumption intention for both groups.

METHODS

Participants

A cross-sectional survey was conducted at universities in South Korea with 197 voluntary participants. The Korean subgroup consisted of 92 respondents (38 men and 54 women) aged 20 to 27 years ($M = 24$), while the Chinese subgroup included 105 respondents (50 men and 55 women) aged 21 to 27 years ($M = 23$); all Chinese participants were international students enrolled at the same Korean university. Data on age, gender, and nationality were collected. The sample size of 197 aligns with that used in comparable FCQ-based cross-cultural studies (Januszewska et al., 2011; Pearcey & Zhan, 2018).

Instrument

The Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ; Steptoe et al. (1995)) was used to assess food-choice motivations. The original 36-item instrument measures nine established dimensions: health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern. Two additional items related to religion-based food selection were included for this study, producing a 10-factor instrument. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). The FCQ has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties across diverse cultural contexts (Fotopoulos et al., 2009; Januszewska et al., 2011; Markovina et al., 2015), supporting its suitability for the East Asian comparison examined in this study.

Internal consistency was assessed separately for each sample using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 1, the reliability coefficients were satisfactory in both groups. To ensure cross-language equivalence, bilingual scholars reviewed the Korean and simplified Chinese versions for semantic consistency.

Table 1: FCQ Factors, Number of Items, and Internal Reliability Estimates (Cronbach's α) by Sample

Factor	No. of Items	Cronbach's α (Korean)	Cronbach's α (Chinese)
Health	6	0.834	0.885
Mood	6	0.760	0.705
Convenience	5	0.769	0.698
Sensory Appeal	4	0.703	0.757
Natural Content	3	0.801	0.750
Price	3	0.771	0.843
Familiarity	3	0.866	0.885
Ethical Concern	3	0.786	0.848
Religion	2	0.677	0.721
Weight Control	3	0.739	0.788

Note: All α values indicate acceptable to excellent internal consistency (> 0.65).

Procedure

Data were collected from Korean students using Google Forms and paper format in classrooms and at the university library. Similarly, data from Chinese international students were also collected using the Google Forms and paper format in classrooms and other locations on campus. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, so the study followed standard academic ethical procedures.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first calculated for each FCQ factor by culture and sex. IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26.0) was used to conduct a 2 (culture: Chinese vs. Korean) \times 2 (sex: male vs. female) factorial ANOVA for each of the 10 factors to examine the main and interaction effects of culture and sex. Fisher's LSD post hoc tests were applied to further examine the pattern of differences when a significant interaction effect was observed. Additionally, Spearman's rank-order correlations were computed to assess the relationships between FCQ factors and participants' self-reported importance of diet and weight satisfaction, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations for each FCQ factor by culture and sex, while Table 3 provides the factor rankings within each cultural and gender group. Figure 1 displays the mean scores by gender across the two cultures. Figure 2 illustrates the factor rankings by culture, with orange bars indicating the top three factors and blue bars indicating the bottom three. Figure 3 presents the ANOVA interaction plots for each factor.

Table 2: Means (SD) of FCQ Dimensions by Gender and Country

Factor	China (N=105)			Korea (N=92)		
	Men (n=50)	Women (n=55)	Total	Men (n=38)	Women (n=54)	Total
Health	3.33 (0.66)	3.30 (0.60)	3.32 (0.62)	3.92 (0.66)	3.67 (0.60)	3.77 (0.63)
Mood	3.30 (0.70)	3.28 (0.72)	3.29 (0.71)	3.85 (0.88)	3.86 (0.63)	3.86 (0.73)
Convenience	3.43 (0.70)	3.40 (0.75)	3.41 (0.72)	3.17 (0.76)	3.53 (0.61)	3.39 (0.69)
Sensory Appeal	3.54 (0.70)	3.44 (0.74)	3.49 (0.72)	3.67 (0.79)	3.94 (0.56)	3.83 (0.68)
Natural Content	3.34 (0.98)	3.30 (0.86)	3.32 (0.91)	3.41 (1.04)	3.38 (0.83)	3.40 (0.83)
Price	3.49 (0.78)	3.38 (0.66)	3.43 (0.72)	3.37 (0.77)	3.26 (0.78)	3.31 (0.77)
Familiarity	3.52 (0.81)	3.41 (0.82)	3.46 (0.81)	3.20 (0.76)	3.12 (0.66)	3.15 (0.70)
Ethical Concern	3.48 (0.75)	3.42 (0.75)	3.45 (0.75)	3.56 (1.04)	3.53 (0.77)	3.54 (0.88)
Religion	3.62 (0.78)	3.26 (0.86)	3.43 (0.84)	3.22 (1.07)	2.88 (0.88)	3.02 (0.97)
Weight Control	3.70 (0.74)	3.66 (0.75)	3.68 (0.74)	3.13 (0.83)	3.00 (0.47)	3.05 (0.64)

Note: Scores reflect 5-point Likert responses (1 = not at all important; 5 = very important). Higher means indicate greater perceived importance of the factor in food choice decisions.

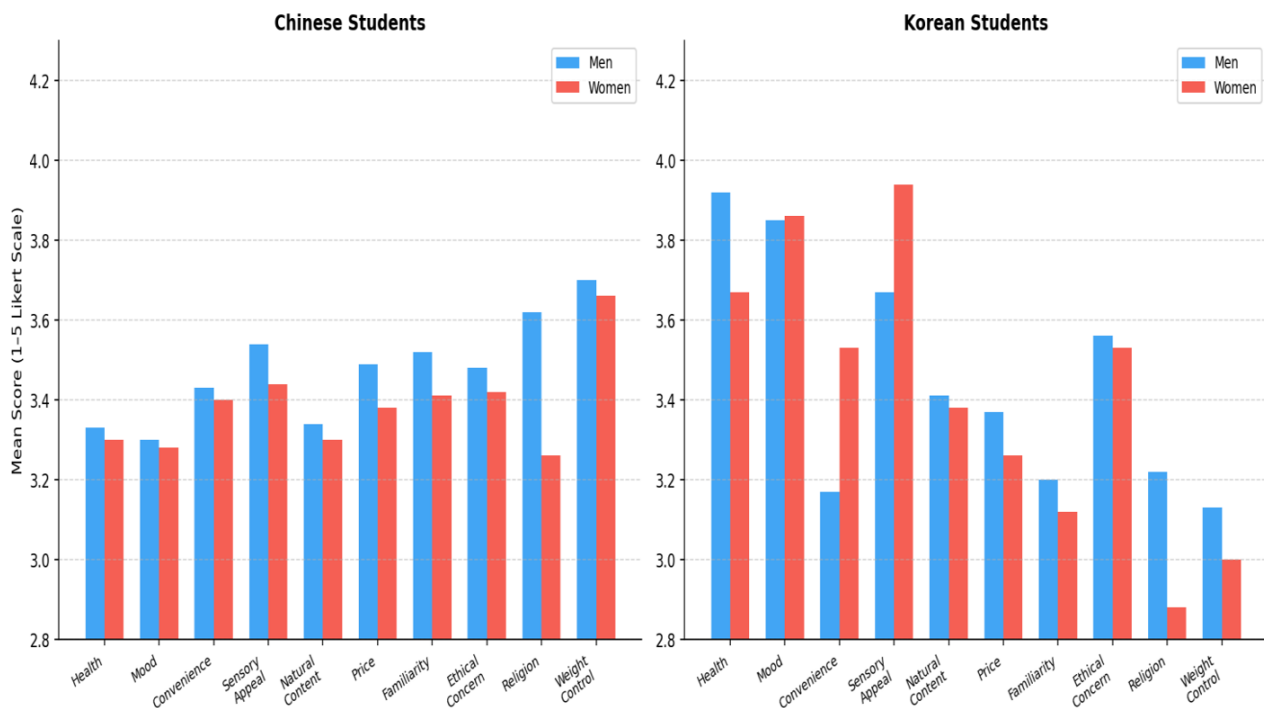


Figure 1: FCQ Mean Scores by Gender for Chinese and Korean University Students

Note: Blue bars = Male; Red bars = Female. Values are mean Likert scores on a 1–5 scale.

Table 3: Rankings of FCQ Factors by Gender and Culture

Rank	China			Korea		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
1	Weight	Weight	Weight	Health	Sensory Appeal	Mood
2	Religion	Sensory Appeal	Sensory Appeal	Mood	Mood	Sensory Appeal
3	Sensory Appeal	Ethical Concern	Familiarity	Sensory Appeal	Health	Health
4	Familiarity	Familiarity	Ethical Concern	Ethical Concern	Ethical Concern	Ethical Concern

Rank	China Men	China Women	China Total	Korea Men	Korea Women	Korea Total
5	Price	Price	Religion	Natural Content	Convenience	Natural Content
6	Ethical Concern	Convenience	Price	Price	Natural Content	Convenience
7	Convenience	Natural Content	Convenience	Religion	Price	Price
8	Natural Content	Health	Natural Content	Familiarity	Familiarity	Familiarity
9	Health	Mood	Health	Convenience	Weight Control	Weight Control
10	Mood	Religion	Mood	Weight Control	Religion	Religion

Note: Rank 1 = highest priority; Rank 10 = lowest priority.

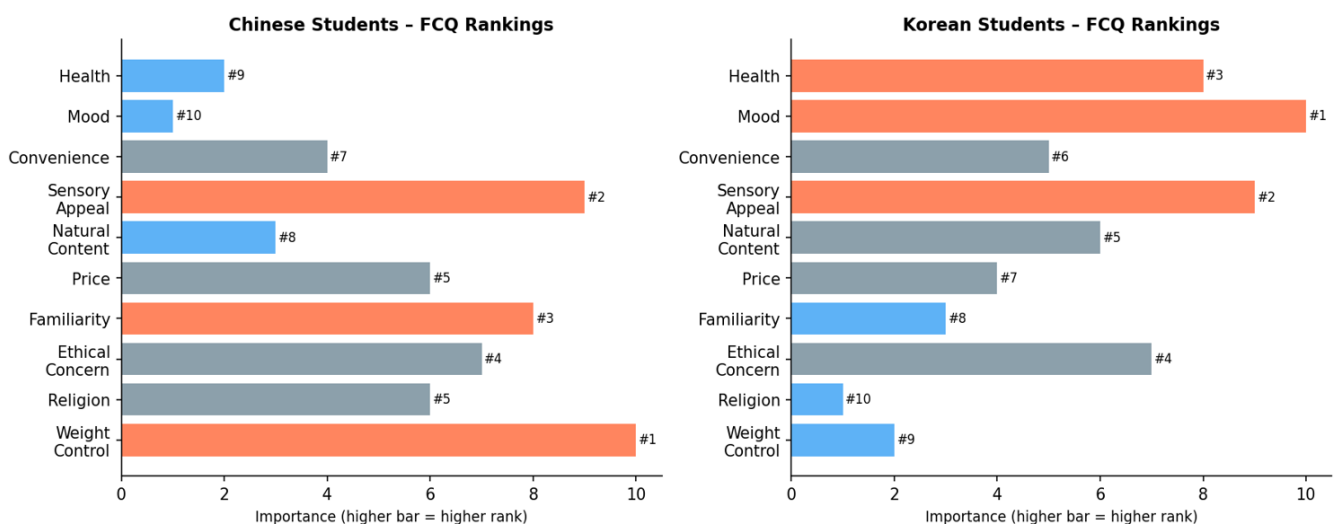


Figure 2: FCQ Factor Rankings by Culture (Combined Samples)

Note: Orange = top-3 ranked factors; Blue = bottom-3 ranked factors. Numbers indicate rank position.

Cultural Differences

Only one of the ten factors showed a significant main effect of culture: health ($p < 0.05$). Korean students ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.63$) rated health well above Chinese students ($M = 3.32, SD = 0.62$), which supports H1. In other words, Korean students weigh health attributes much more heavily when deciding what to eat a pattern that fits the health-centered character of Korean cuisine and its Confucian dietary roots (Chung et al., 2016). It also lines up with population-level data, where Korean consumers show higher rates of health-promoting dietary behavior than their Chinese counterparts (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2023).

The other nine factors mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, familiarity, ethical concern, religion, and weight control showed no significant cultural difference. On these dimensions, then, Chinese and Korean students converge rather than diverge.

Sex Differences

Sex had significant main effects for six of the ten factors: natural content, price, ethical concern, religion, familiarity and weight control (all $p < 0.05$). The direction was the surprise.” In Western literature, women generally score higher on health-related food motivations (Arganini et al., 2012); however, in this study men from both cultural groups scored higher than women on all six factors. In short, in this sample of East Asian

university students, men placed more importance than women on natural content, price, ethical sourcing, religious dietary rules, familiarity and weight management.

This finding may seem to be at odds with some previous research but aligns with more recent studies indicating that young East Asian men are becoming more conscious of food quality and body composition, driven by the rise of fitness culture and the impact of social media (Deng et al., 2022; Oh & Park, 2023). At the main-effect level, the factors of health, mood, convenience, and sensory appeal showed no significant sex differences.

Culture-by-Sex Interactions

Three of the ten factors exhibited significant culture-by-sex interactions: Mood, convenience, and sensory appeal (all $p < 0.05$

$p < 0.05$; see Figure 3; (Pearcey & Zhan, 2018). In other words, the relationship between sex and food-choice motivation differs between the Chinese and Korean groups.

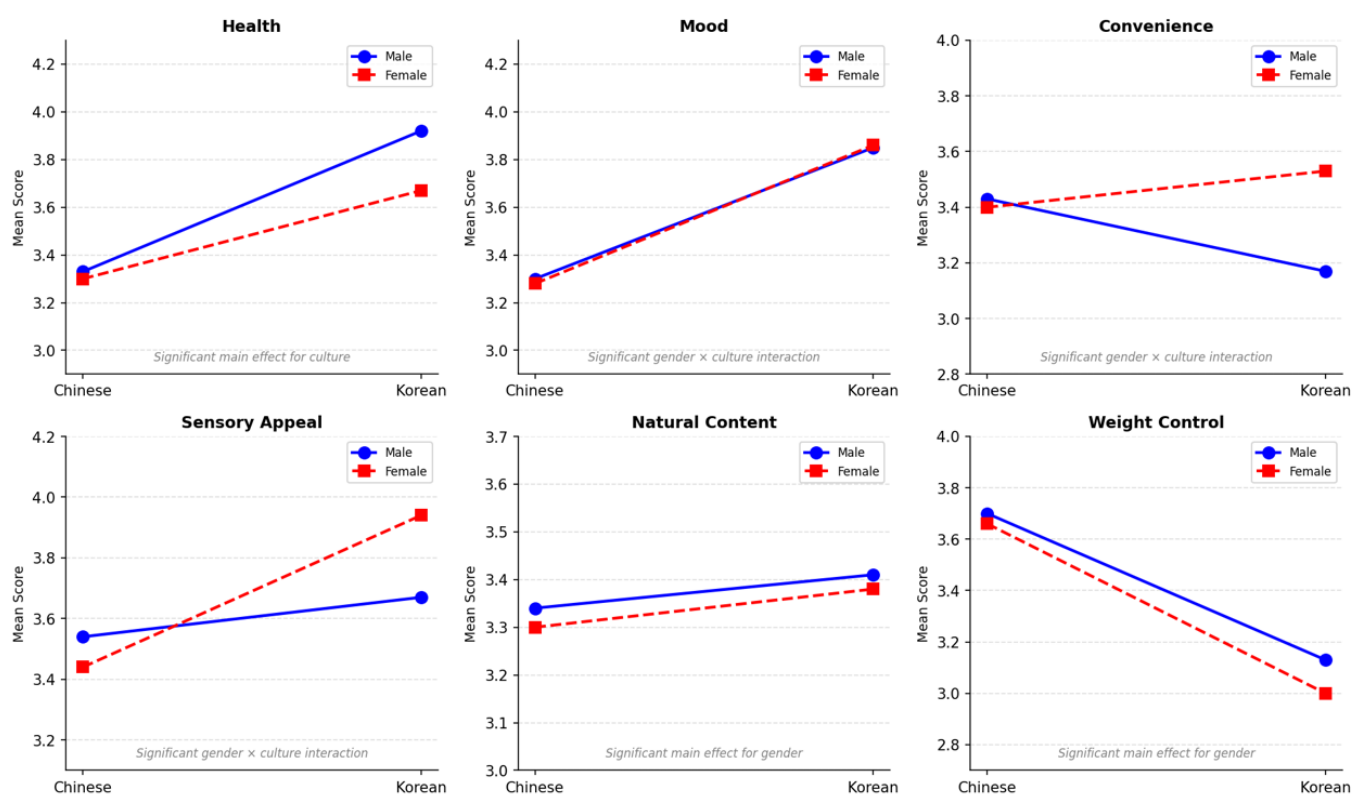


Figure 3: ANOVA Interaction Plots for Selected FCQ Factors by Sex and Culture

Note: Solid blue lines = Male; Dashed red lines = Female. All significance values $p < .05$.

For the mood factor, Korean students, both men and women reported significantly higher mood-driven food choice than Chinese students, and within each culture, there were no significant differences between sexes (H_2 partially supported). This suggests that mood-based eating is more of a cultural norm in Korea, most likely showing differences in how the two cultures socialize emotional regulation through food as explained by Bongers and Jansen (2020).

The convenience interaction was primarily driven by differences within the Korean group: Korean women ($M=3.53$) scored significantly higher than Korean men ($M=3.17$), whereas the difference among Chinese students was minimal (H_3 partially supported). Because the pattern of means crosses between the two cultural groups, the interaction is disordinal, indicating that cultural context fundamentally alters how convenience

functions as a food-choice motive across genders. This pattern may reflect gendered expectations regarding food preparation and time management in Korea (Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2024).

Sensory appeal followed a similar pattern to cultural moderation in supporting H4. Korean women scored significantly higher than Korean men ($M = 3.94$), whereas in the Chinese group men scored slightly higher than women ($M = 3.54$). Moreover, Korean women place high value on sensory qualities, consistent with the tradition of valuing the aesthetic aspect of food presentation (Chung et al., 2016).

Self-Perceptions of Diet and Weight Satisfaction

Table 4 presents Spearman's rank-order correlations linking participants' self-reported importance of diet and weight satisfaction to each of the ten FCQ factors, reported separately for Chinese and Korean participants.

Table 4: Spearman's r Correlation Coefficients between Importance of Diet and Weight Satisfaction with FCQ Factors

Scale	Diet Importance		Weight Satisfaction	
	China	Korea	China	Korea
Health	0.314**	0.130	0.437**	0.190
Mood	0.300**	0.148	0.377**	0.147
Convenience	0.333**	0.107	0.393**	-0.047
Sensory Appeal	0.243*	0.130	0.357**	-0.060
Natural Content	0.264*	0.172	0.528**	0.379**
Price	0.335**	-0.041	0.531**	0.159
Weight Control	0.673**	0.479**	0.864**	0.635**
Familiarity	0.167	0.226*	0.508**	0.014
Ethical Concern	0.285**	0.140	0.512**	0.246*
Religion	0.364**	0.174	0.453**	0.174

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Positive coefficients indicate that higher scores on the FCQ factor are associated with greater reported importance of diet or greater weight satisfaction.

Most FCQ factors in the Chinese sample were significantly positively correlated with both diet importance and weight satisfaction. This with weight control being the strongest predictor of each ($r=0.673$ for diet; $r=0.864$ for weight satisfaction, both $p<0.01$). The passage supports H5, stating that body-related concerns are particularly salient for Chinese students and align with prior reports by Chen, Zheng, and Liu (2022) documenting increased weight consciousness among Chinese young adults (Tanenbaum et al., 2016).

The Korean sample showed a more selective pattern. Weight control again showed a strong correlation with both diet importance ($r=0.479$, $p<0.01$) and weight satisfaction ($r=0.635$, $p<0.01$). Some significant factors for Chinese students showed correlations near zero within the Korean group. Therefore, the two samples differ not only in motivations behind food choices but also in how those motivations relate to students' perceptions of their diet and body. This distinction should be taken into account when developing culturally tailored dietary interventions (Reuber, Yager, & McLean, 2025).

Discussion

This study compared food-choice motivations of Chinese and Korean university students using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) and examined how culture and sex moderate these motivations. The results reveal a complex pattern of convergence and divergence, indicating that food choices are influenced by culture and gender among East Asian students, including Chinese students living in South Korea. Because the Chinese participants were international students residing in South Korea, the comparisons reported here should be interpreted as differences between Chinese students living in Korea and their Korean counterparts, rather than as contrasts between "Chinese culture" and "Korean culture." Some true cultural differences may be attenuated by exposure to the same host food environment, while acculturation effects may concurrently emerge. The group labels below should be read with this caveat in mind.

Cross-Cultural Patterns

The most pronounced cross-cultural difference found in the study was for the health factor. Korean students scored significantly higher than Chinese students, thus providing partial support for H1. This pattern is consistent with the broader cultural narrative in Korea, where health and wellbeing have been historically associated with food, both symbolically and pragmatically (Chung et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2014), and the current food-labeling practices are indicative of a health-conscious consumer base (Kim et al., 2014). The finding also extends (Pearcey & Zhan, 2018) observation that American and Chinese students place similar value on health; our data suggest that Korean students may rate health even higher than either of these groups. National dietary surveys support this interpretation, indicating that Korean consumers engage in more health-promoting dietary behaviors than other East Asian populations (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2023).

Contrary to H2–H5, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, and natural content did not show significant between-culture differences at the main-effects level. Both groups rated sensory appeal highly; it ranked second overall in each culture, which reinforces evidence that sensory motivations are not exclusive to Western or European populations (Crossley & Nazir, 2002; McKenna et al., 2025; Sushma et al., 2014). This finding challenges earlier claims that Asian populations are less driven by sensory considerations and likely reflects how globalization and urban food culture have reshaped dietary preferences. The recent meta-analysis by Torres-Moreno et al. (2024) supports this conclusion, demonstrating that across cultures and over time, sensory appeal remains consistently among the top drivers of student food choice.

In general, Chinese students put weight control first, and health ninth. Korean students, however, ranked health first and weight control last. This discrepancy is a paradox described in the globalization literature, where Chinese young adults increasingly internalize Western body ideals but devalue nutritional quality (Chen et al., 2022; Tanenbaum et al., 2016). This finding is supported by post-pandemic literature, which shows that COVID-19-related social isolation amplified body image concerns and disordered eating patterns among Chinese university students to a greater extent than among their Korean counterparts (Kim & Yeon, 2021; Marty et al., 2021).

Gender Differences

A significant main effect for sex was identified across six FCQ factors, with men scoring higher than women on natural content, price, ethical concern, religion, familiarity, and weight control. These findings are counterintuitive in light of Western-based research where women typically score higher on health and weight-related food concerns (Arganini et al., 2012; Beardsworth et al., 2002). However, the pattern observed here may reflect culturally specific dynamics in East Asian university contexts, where young men, particularly those engaged with fitness culture, may be more attentive to weight and food composition. Social media exposure to male-targeted health and fitness content in Korea and China has been documented as an influential shaper of food choice behavior among young men (Deng et al., 2022; Oh & Park, 2023).

Understanding the Interaction of Culture and Sex

Our research results revealed a significant main effect of sex on six FCQ factors. Most importantly, men scored significantly higher than women on natural content, price, ethical concern, regions, familiarity, and weight control. Although this pattern departs from the Western literature, in which women typically score higher on health- and weight-related food concerns (Arganini et al., 2012; Beardsworth et al., 2002), it is better understood against East-Asian-specific evidence than judged against a Western benchmark. Oh and Park (2023) report that fitness culture and masculinity norms lead young Korean men to attend closely to weight management and food composition, and Cowan et al. (2023) show that the direction and strength of gender effects on food choice among Chinese young adults are highly context-dependent rather than fixed. Read in this light, the present sex pattern is consistent with, rather than counterintuitive to, contemporary East Asian findings, reflecting the salience of body composition and weight management for young men in Korea and China. Present-day young men in Korea and China are increasingly influenced by health and fitness content on social media, which is one of the reasons for such food choice behavior among young men (Deng et al., 2022; Oh & Park, 2023).

Consistent with prior research (Arganini et al., 2012; Pearcey & Zhan, 2018), both male and female participants across both cultures agreed on the importance of sensory appeal. Women in the Korean group rated sensory appeal particularly highly. Women in both groups also reported similar levels of health awareness in food choice, consistent with cross-national evidence suggesting broad female health consciousness in food-related decisions (El Ansari et al., 2012; Share & Stewart-Knox, 2012).

Comparison with Prior Cross-Cultural Research

The present findings may be fruitfully interpreted in the context of a comparative study of American and Chinese college students using the same FCQ by Pearcey and Zhan (2018). In that study, the groups differed significantly on the convenience and price (higher for Americans) and natural content and ethical concerns (higher for Chinese). In the present study comparing Korean and Chinese students, the main between-group difference was health (higher for Koreans). This suggests that Chinese students may lie somewhere between Western pragmatism (convenience, price) and Korean health-centrism. Comparative data from more recent FCQ studies in the region, including a 2023 study of Japanese university students (Yamamoto, Takahashi, & Sugimoto, 2023) and a 2024 study of Vietnamese students (Nguyen, Le, & Bui, 2024), further substantiate the unique positioning of Korean students as particularly health-motivated within the East Asian university landscape.

The consistency of sensory appeal as a top-rated factor across American, Chinese, and Korean samples in both the Pearcey and Zhan (2018) study and the present investigation adds to its cross-cultural validity as a dominant food choice motivator, consistent with conclusions of recent systematic reviews (Torres-Moreno et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to point out. First, the sample size was relatively small (N=197), which reduced statistical power and the ability to generalize findings. Larger and more diverse samples, ideally from several institutions and regions within each country, would add to the robustness and external validity of the results. Second, the FCQ, though popular, has been questioned on whether its ten-factor structure covers the relevant motivations (Fotopoulos et al., 2009) and whether those factors have the same meaning across cultures (Januszewska et al., 2011). Third, the FCQ only measures conscious motivations, whereas unconscious and habitual influences also play a large role in what people eat (Köster, 2009; Simonson, 2005).

Fourth, all Chinese participants were international students in a Korean university, and their food choices may differ from those of Chinese students in their home country, because of acculturation pressures and limited availability of familiar local food. Replication of the study with students in mainland China would be useful. Fifth, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal claims. Longitudinal work could monitor whether motivations for food choices change as students advance through their degrees or following major disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Marty et al., 2021). Sixth, the digital and social media environment is fast-moving – especially for younger cohorts, so the dynamics may have already shifted by the time we collected our data, underscoring the need for updated cross-cultural replication (Deng et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to cross-cultural food choice research by comparing motivations between Chinese and Korean university students using the FCQ within a factorial ANOVA framework. Korean students rated health as a more important factor in food choice, while both groups similarly valued sensory appeal, ethical concern, and mood. Sex differences emerged: men in both cultures reported higher scores for natural content, price sensitivity, ethical concern, religion, familiarity, and weight control. Significant culture-by-sex interactions for mood, convenience, and sensory appeal highlight the conditional nature of gender effects on food choice.

The practical implications of these findings are pertinent to health education and dietary intervention programs for college students in East Asia (Reuber et al., 2025). Strategies to promote healthy eating should be culturally sensitive to the different priorities of the various student groups with health as a focus for Korean students, while perhaps addressing the weight-health disconnect observed for Chinese students. Gender-tailored approaches that consider the patterns of food choice behavior specific to East Asians identified here may also improve intervention effectiveness (Mak et al., 2012). Collectively, the findings emphasize the importance of cross-cultural comparative research to enhance our understanding of the complex, culturally embedded nature of food choice behavior.

Beyond the practical implications, the findings have theoretical implications for models of cross-cultural food choice. The dominant individualism-collectivism framework (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 2014) has been used to contrast a utilitarian, individualistic ‘West’ and a relational, collectivistic ‘East’, treating East Asian cultures as a relatively homogeneous bloc. The present results challenge that coarse dichotomy for two reasons. First, two collectivist Confucian-heritage groups diverged sharply in the meaning of food: Korean students emphasized health while Chinese students emphasized weight control, indicating meaningful, theoretically important variation within the collectivist category rather than only between East and West. Second, culture-dependent gender effects (for example, men rating weight control and natural content more highly, and the disordinal culture-by-sex interactions for mood, convenience, and sensory appeal) suggest that gender functions as a culturally contingent moderator rather than a fixed main effect, a nuance the broad individualism-collectivism account does not capture. We therefore recommend that cross-cultural food choice theory adopt more granular, within-region and gender-sensitive models, and that the FCQ be expanded to include emerging motivations such as sustainability and body-image concerns (Verain et al., 2015). Specifically, future research should (a) test measurement invariance of the FCQ across samples of Chinese and Korean individuals before making strict comparative conclusions, (b) replicate the comparison with Chinese students in mainland China to disentangle culture from acculturation, and (c) use longitudinal and mixed-method designs to test whether these motivational profiles are stable or whether they change with exposure to a shared host environment.

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TRANSPARENCY: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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