

# Investigating Different Situations of Customers' Food Choice Preferences in Shopping Malls

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to study the different situations of customers' food choice preferences in shopping malls. The present research is applicable and exploratory in terms of its purpose, and descriptive-survey and correlational in terms of its nature and method. The statistical population of the present study includes food consumers in food courts of shopping malls in Tehran (Arg, Kourosh, Palladium, Sana and Iran Mall). Given that the statistical population of the study is unlimited and extensive, the Cochran formula for such population was used to determine the sample size, and 384 people were selected as a sample by simple random sampling. The collection tool in the present study includes a researcher-made questionnaire derived from a qualitative method. SPSS software and structural equations were used to analyze the findings. The results showed that positive emotions are significantly associated with high mood characteristics (such as a preference for colorful, warm, fragrant, and tasty foods), and negative emotions are significantly associated with low mood characteristics (such as choosing fatty or salty foods) in food choice. Also, consumption goals influenced by these mood characteristics can lead to an increase in positive emotions or a decrease in negative emotions. Contextual factors such as past experiences, culture, and health knowledge also play a mediating role in this process. By identifying a conceptual model of nutritional behavior in an emotional context, this study can provide a basis for designing policy interventions and food marketing in public settings. One of the most important practical suggestions of the research is to design advertising programs based on emotional states and to develop nutritional guidelines for commercial spaces such as malls.

## Keywords:

Emotion,  
Customer emotion,  
Positive emotion,  
Negative emotion,  
Food choice

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## Extended Abstract

### Introduction

In recent years, understanding the role of emotions in human daily decision-making, especially in the field of food consumption behavior, has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in the fields of psychology, nutrition sciences, and behavioral marketing. One area where there is a complex relationship between emotional processes and behavioral decision-making is food preference and choice. In the past, studies generally focused on physiological and nutritional factors affecting food choices, but today it has been found that emotional components such as anxiety, stress, happiness, sadness, and guilt can directly or indirectly affect food choices (Brückner et al., 2023).

Within the framework of the cognitive appraisal theory of emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), it is stated that people show certain emotional reactions based on their mental evaluation of situations, and these reactions can determine the motivation and direction of their subsequent behavior. Accordingly, when a person is in an emotional situation such as anger, sadness, or anxiety, they may tend to consume high-calorie, high-fat, or sweet foods to calm themselves down (Barker et al., 2019). This can create an unhealthy cycle of negative emotions and emotional overeating, which can ultimately lead to problems such as obesity, diabetes, and eating disorders (Heshmati et al., 2023).

Positive emotions can lead to healthier food choices, while negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, sadness, or anger, are often associated with the consumption of high-fat, sugary, or high-calorie foods (Brown, 2020).

In today's world, with the expansion of urbanization, increasing psychological pressures from economic and social factors, and the rapid growth of shopping centers and large commercial spaces (malls), humans are frequently exposed to situations prone to triggering various emotions. In such situations, food decisions are often made emotionally rather than rationally. Researchers believe that food consumption acts as a coping mechanism against negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and sadness; a phenomenon known in the psychological literature as "emotional eating" (Vannucci et al., 2015).

Given the lack of comprehensive and indigenous research on the combined examination of emotional states and food preferences in social and commercial environments such as shopping malls in Iran, this study seeks to answer the main question: What are the different states of customers' food choice preferences in shopping malls?

## Theoretical Framework

### Food Emotions

Different types of emotions, either negative or positive, have been examined in previous research, along with those evoked by certain foods, as well as previously experienced emotions that produce specific outcomes in consumers, such as customer satisfaction and product choice. Accordingly, it is thought that eating is a response mechanism specifically to negative and positive emotions. Excessive and unhealthy food consumption behavior is one of the main drivers of the growing epidemic of obesity and overweight globally, making it a serious health threat worldwide (WHO, 2020).

### The role of positive emotions in food choice

Although research often highlights the link between negative emotions and eating, it has been shown that positive emotions also influence food consumption. For example, Evers et al., (2013) suggest that positive emotions play as important a role in food consumption as negative emotions. Using a study, they found that, specifically in everyday life, snacking occurs more frequently when experiencing positive emotions, leading to higher calorie intake as a response to positive emotional arousal. Similarly, Bongers et al., (2013) found that people

who are particularly emotional eaters tend to consume more food in positive emotional states compared to negative states (Cardi et al., 2015).

### **The role of negative emotions in food choice**

Negative emotions influence food choice. People turn to different foods when dealing with different emotions. Increased food consumption during emotional and psychological states such as stress may have negative effects on health. An unbalanced diet may promote many chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke (Konttinen, 2020).

Agrawal et al., (2025) examined the role of emotion invalidation and found that young people whose emotions are ignored and have poor emotion regulation skills are significantly more likely to engage in emotional eating.

Fielding-Singh & Cooper (2023) examined the emotional management of motherhood: food processing, maternal guilt, and emotion processing. They showed that feelings of guilt prior to consuming pleasurable foods such as chocolate, lead to reduced enjoyment and even increased compensatory and excessive eating behaviors. This feeling is also linked to nutritional parenting patterns, especially among women and mothers of young children.

### **Research Methodology**

The present study is applicable and exploratory in terms of purpose, and descriptive-survey and correlational in terms of nature and method. The statistical population of the present study includes food consumers in food courts of shopping centers in Tehran (Arg, Kourosh, Palladium, Sana and Iran Mall). Given that the statistical population of the study is uncertain and extensive, the Cochran formula for an unlimited population was used to determine the sample size, and 384 people were selected as samples using simple random sampling method. The collection tool in the present study includes a researcher-made questionnaire derived from a qualitative method.

### **Research findings**

SPSS software and structural equations were used to analyze the findings. The results showed that positive emotions are significantly related to high mood characteristics (such as a tendency to colorful, warm, fragrant and tasty foods) and negative emotions are significantly related to low mood characteristics (such as choosing fatty or salty foods) in food selection. Also, consumption goals influenced by these mood characteristics can lead to an increase in positive emotions or a decrease in negative emotions. Contextual factors such as past experiences, culture, and health knowledge also play a mediating role in this process. By identifying a conceptual model of nutritional behavior in an emotional context, this study can provide a basis for designing policy interventions and food marketing in public settings. The most important practical suggestions of the research are designing advertising programs based on emotional states and developing nutritional guidelines for commercial spaces such as malls.

### **Conclusion**

The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating different situations of customers' food choice preferences in shopping centers. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Agrawal et al., (2025), Fielding-Singh & Cooper, (2023), Guerrini-Usubini et al., (2023), Ha & Lim, (2023), Ebrahimi et al., (2023), Ogundijo et al., (2022), Mandato et al., (2022), Mohammadi et al., (2022), and Olegario et al., (2021). Agrawal et al., (2025) showed that people whose emotions are ignored in youth and have low emotion regulation skills have a significantly higher tendency to emotional eating.

According to the present study, the following suggestion is made:

It is suggested that restaurants and food courts design their menus in a way that covers a variety of foods that can respond to different emotions of people; especially on days that are generally or individually emotionally charged (such as holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, or days of mourning), the menu should be designed to accommodate both hedonic consumption and health-oriented options.