



MESTRADO EM GESTÃO DE EMPRESAS

**Eating to belong: How social identity, group norms and  
promotions shape ethnic food consumption**

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como requisito parcial para a obtenção do grau de Mestre  
em Gestão de Empresas

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## Resumo

Este estudo centra-se nos mecanismos psicossociais e situacionais que influenciam o comportamento dos consumidores face aos produtos alimentares étnicos (PAEs). Tendo por base a Teoria da Identidade Social (TIS), analisa de que forma a influência social se reflecte na intenção e na prática de compra de PAEs, através do papel mediador da identidade social e dos efeitos moderadores das normas do grupo e das promoções de vendas. Para analisar as relações entre os constructos considerados no estudo utilizou-se uma metodologia quantitativa de natureza transversal. Participaram 959 consumidores de PAEs, de nacionalidade portuguesa. O modelo concetual foi testado com Modelos de Equações Estruturais (MEE) e com a macro PROCESS de Hayes (Modelo 21). Os resultados evidenciam que a influência social exerce efeitos directos e indirectos no comportamento de compra, sendo este último parcialmente mediado pela identidade social. As normas do grupo moderam a relação entre a influência social e a identidade social, enquanto as promoções atenuam a associação entre a identidade social e o comportamento de compra. Constatou-se, ainda, que o consumo de PAEs ultrapassa a satisfação de uma necessidade básica e assume uma forte ligação a dinâmicas de pertença simbólica e de validação social. Do ponto de vista teórico, o estudo contribui para a integração de variáveis psicossociais e situacionais num modelo de mediação moderada. No plano prático, reforça a importância de estratégias de marketing culturalmente sensíveis, que articulem a autenticidade e os estímulos promocionais para envolver os consumidores em mercados alimentares multiculturais.

**Palavras-chave:** consumo de produtos alimentares étnicos, identidade social, normas do grupo, promoções, comportamento do consumidor.

## Abstract

This study examines the psychosocial and situational mechanisms that shape consumer behaviour towards ethnic food products (EFPs). Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), it investigates how social influence affects ethnic food purchasing, through the mediating role of social identity and the moderating effects of group norms and sales promotions. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was conducted among 959 Portuguese consumers, and the proposed model was tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 21). Results reveal that social influence exerts a direct and indirect effect on purchasing behaviour, partially mediated by social identity. Group norms moderate the relationship between social influence and social identity, while promotions weaken the link between social identity and purchasing behaviour. The findings demonstrate that ethnic food consumption extends beyond utilitarian motives, being strongly driven by symbolic belonging and social validation. The study contributes to the literature by integrating psychosocial and situational variables within a single moderated mediation framework. Practically, it highlights the need for culturally sensitive marketing strategies that balance authenticity and promotional stimuli to enhance consumer engagement in multicultural food markets.

**Keywords:** ethnic food products consumption, social identity, group norms, promotions, consumer behaviour.

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## List of acronyms and abbreviations

AMOS	-	Analysis of Moment Structures
AVE	-	Average Variance Extracted
$\beta$	-	Unstandardized beta
CFA	-	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CFI	-	Comparative Fit Index
CI	-	Confidence intervals
CMB	-	Common method bias
CR	-	Composite Reliability
EFPs	-	Ethnic Food Products
LLCI	-	Lower limits of the 95% confidence interval
M	-	Mean
MSV	-	Maximum Shared Variance
p	-	p-value
RMSEA	-	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SD	-	Standard-deviation
SE	-	Standard error
SEM	-	Structural Equation Modelling
SIT	-	Social identity theory
t	-	t-test
TLI	-	Tucker-Lewis Index
ULCI	-	Upper limits of the 95% confidence interval
VIF	-	Variance inflation factor
$\chi^2$	-	Chi-Square

## **Introduction**

Ethnic Food Products (EFPs) are defined by Kwon (2015) as foods that are typical of a specific ethnic group or country and are culturally and socially accepted by consumers outside that group. The growing interest in these products stems from migratory flows and the increasing appreciation of cultural diversity (Kuo & Helm, 2025). The expansion of cosmopolitan cities and the easy access to culinary content on social media have fostered new eating practices in which EFPs play an increasingly prominent role (Maksan et al., 2019). Initially associated with migrant communities, this phenomenon has become integrated into mainstream consumption patterns, reflecting the cultural and symbolic reconfiguration of eating habits in Western contexts (Suntikul et al., 2020).

Globalization and acculturation processes have facilitated the circulation of culinary practices, ingredients, and cultural meanings, promoting the incorporation of new flavours into domestic contexts (Siddiqui et al., 2022). The spread of low-cost airlines has intensified tourist mobility and international flows, exposing consumers to new gastronomic experiences and increasing their propensity to experiment with and adopt eating habits associated with their travel experiences (Álvarez-Dias et al., 2019; Mak et al., 2012). The consumption of EFPs thus transcends its functional dimension and assumes a symbolic character through which individuals express curiosity, cultural openness, and social distinction (Suntikul et al., 2020). Factors such as food neophilia, cultural familiarity, and perceived authenticity have been identified as key determinants of purchase intention (Karacaoğlu & Cankül, 2024). At the same time, ethnic and social identity is understood as a dynamic construction resulting from interactions between in-groups and reference groups (Chatzopoulou & Navazhylava, 2022). Recent studies demonstrate that the consumption of ethnic foods may serve as a means of identity affirmation (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023).

In addition to identity and cultural motivations, EFP purchasing behaviour is also influenced by situational and marketing factors. Elements such as promotions, tastings at points of sale, or product visibility on store shelves have a significant impact on purchasing decisions, influencing the conversion of intention into actual behaviour (Suntikul et al., 2020). According to Cengiz and Cengiz (2023), the way marketing strategies are perceived by consumers can reinforce or attenuate the symbolic and emotional impulses associated with consumption. In contexts where identity motivations prevail, consumption tends to be driven by symbolic and belonging-related ties, whereas in highly promotional environments, decision-making is guided by rational and utilitarian incentives (Herdiyanti et al., 2024). It is therefore important to

understand how situational factors interact with psychosocial dimensions – such as social influence and social identity – to explain the complexity of EFP purchasing behaviour.

The study of EFP consumption is particularly relevant for the field of Management, as it helps to elucidate how symbolic, social, and situational factors influence purchasing decisions within contexts of increasing cultural diversity (Kuo & Helm, 2025). Research in this domain contributes to the development of more effective organisational strategies that foster innovation in the food retail sector and the creation of culturally inclusive value propositions (Arviv et al., 2024). By simultaneously analysing psychosocial and contextual dimensions, this study seeks to address a gap in the literature, which tends to examine these factors in isolation. Consequently, it provides both theoretical and practical contributions, enriching academic understanding of consumer behaviour and supporting business policies that strengthen the competitiveness and sustainability of retail and food distribution companies.

Despite the growing academic interest in EFPs, most studies have explored the cultural and symbolic dimensions of consumption separately, overlooking the simultaneous influence of psychosocial and situational factors on purchasing behaviour. Furthermore, empirical works that integrate Social Identity Theory (SIT) with marketing stimuli and group norms remain scarce (Hyun & Lee, 2020; Karacaoğlu & Cankül, 2024).

This study proposes an integrative model that combines symbolic variables (social identity and social influence) with contextual variables (group norms and promotions), thereby addressing this theoretical gap. By adopting a moderated mediation perspective, the research expands understanding of how the sense of belonging and situational stimuli interact to shape multicultural consumption.

## **1. Literature review and hypothesis development**

Driven by the intensification of migratory flows, increasing cultural openness, and the search for authenticity in food experiences, the market for EFPs has experienced continuous global growth (Ferrales-López, 2024). This expansion is reflected in the diversification of supply and the consolidation of a consumer segment that transcends migrant communities, becoming integrated into the eating habits of Western consumers (Suntikul et al., 2020). Understanding the factors that guide the purchase of EFPs makes it possible to analyse how psychosocial and situational variables influence consumer decision-making processes in culturally diverse societies.

### **1.1. Social influence and purchasing behaviour**

Social influence plays a decisive role in consumption decisions, particularly when the products involved carry a strong cultural component, as is the case with EFPs (Liu et al., 2019). Purchasing decisions stem not only from individual preferences but also from processes of social comparison and adjustment to the expectations of relevant groups, such as family, friends, or cultural communities (Çoker et al., 2022). When consumers perceive that certain behaviours are valued by their reference group, they tend to align their choices in order to gain social approval and recognition (Pepe, 2025).

SIT argues that the self-concept is largely shaped by the sense of belonging to meaningful groups (Bar-On & Lamm, 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This sense of affiliation guides consumer attitudes and behaviours, as individuals reinforce their social integration within the group by adopting specific eating practices (Manzi et al., 2023). In the domain of food consumption, social influence manifests itself both in the adoption of new products and in the maintenance of shared cultural habits, reflecting the pursuit of social acceptance and group alignment (Gligoric et al., 2023). Pepe (2025) confirms that peer influence has a direct impact on purchase intention and behaviour, as consumers tend to replicate the choices observed within their reference groups.

Behaviour is strongly influenced by group norms and expectations, since the desire for acceptance and the need for social integration encourage individuals to adjust their choices to collective references (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023). Similarly, Bar-On and Lamm (2023) note that consumers internalise the values and practices shared by the groups with which they identify, as this reinforces both their self-image and social cohesion. Çoker et al. (2022) further confirm that, in food-related contexts, perceived social approval increases the likelihood of choosing products associated with one's reference group. To affirm their identity, consumers adjust their food preferences and purchasing behaviour according to the norms observed within their social circles (Pepe, 2025).

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between social influence and the purchasing behaviour of EFPs.

### **1.2. The mediating role of social identity**

Social identity represents a fundamental dimension in understanding consumer decision-making, as individuals' self-concept is partly defined by their membership in groups with which they identify (Hogg et al., 2017). Bar-On and Lamm (2023) further argue that identity depends

on the extent to which the norms and values associated with these groups are internalised. In the context of consumption, this perspective explains why food choices often serve as expressions of belonging, differentiation, and symbolic valorisation.

Food functions as an identity marker that allows individuals to express their beliefs, cultural preferences, and lifestyles (Liu et al., 2019). The adoption or rejection of certain foods is often guided by shared values that reinforce group cohesion and establish distinctions from other groups (Campos et al., 2024). Food identity can therefore be understood as a system of practices and narratives through which consumers communicate “who they are” and “which group they belong to” (Ferrales-López, 2024). For many consumers, the choice of EFPs transcends mere functional satisfaction and assumes a symbolic meaning associated with cultural curiosity, openness to diversity, and cosmopolitanism (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023). By purchasing products originating from different cultural backgrounds, individuals position themselves as culturally sensitive consumers. This practice strengthens social identity and facilitates integration into groups that value diversity and differentiation from more traditional social groups (Goel et al., 2023).

The consumption of EFPs also involves an emotional component that elicits feelings of nostalgia, pleasure, and cultural discovery, transforming eating into a symbolic ritual through which individuals reaffirm their identity (Maksan et al., 2019). Cengiz and Cengiz (2023) add that EFP consumption, beyond being a purchasing behaviour, also expresses social and cultural values. By shaping perceptions and attitudes, social influence stimulates the construction of identities aligned with group norms (Bar-On & Lamm, 2023). These identities, in turn, reinforce both the sense of belonging and social self-image. In the case of EFPs, it is expected that consumers who feel supported and valued by members of their reference groups will develop an identity associated with these products, thereby increasing their likelihood of purchase (Kuo & Helm, 2025). Based on this evidence, the second research hypothesis was formulated.

Hypothesis 2: Social identity mediates the relationship between social influence and the purchasing behaviour of EFPs.

### **1.3. The moderating role of group norms**

Social norms constitute mechanisms that guide behaviour and define what is considered acceptable or desirable within a group (Liu et al., 2019). The literature distinguishes between two main types: (a) descriptive norms, which indicate what most people do, and (b) injunctive norms, which express what the group approves or disapproves of (Çoker et al., 2022). Both

types shape individual choices, as behaviour tends to align with the practices and values shared by one's reference group (Monterrosa et al., 2020).

In the food domain, group norms influence perceptions of normality, acceptability, and the prestige associated with certain products (Pepe, 2025). Adherence to norms originating from significant groups (e.g., family, community) exerts a stronger impact than adherence to more generic societal norms (Çoker et al., 2022). Social proximity and the degree of identification with the group determine the intensity of this influence, making eating behaviour a reflection of belonging and conformity dynamics (Monterrosa et al., 2020). The higher the level of social identification, the more likely individuals are to adjust their behaviour to collective expectations, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging and social acceptance (Liu et al., 2019). However, group norms may amplify or weaken the effects of social influence depending on their strength and the extent to which they are internalised by the individual.

In the case of EFPs, the norms shared within cultural or social circles can act as catalysts for identity construction (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). When a group values diverse eating practices, individuals tend to adopt consumption behaviours that reinforce such norms (Enriquez & Archila-Godinez, 2021). Conversely, in groups where these practices are less valued, the expression of identity through food tends to be inhibited (El Hadad-Gauthier et al., 2022). Therefore, the effect of social influence on social identity does not occur uniformly but depends on the normative orientation of the reference group. When norms are flexible and inclusive, they reinforce the impact of social influence; when they are restrictive, they reduce the likelihood of adopting behaviours aligned with dietary diversity (Wolfswinkel et al., 2025). Based on these assumptions, the third hypothesis was formulated.

Hypothesis 3: Group norms moderate the relationship between social influence and social identity, such that this relationship is stronger when the level of group norms is low.

#### **1.4. The moderating role of promotions**

Situational factors exert a significant influence on purchasing decisions, as they function as contextual stimuli that affect both consumer intention and behaviour (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023). Among these factors, promotions play a particularly relevant role since they modify value perception, reduce perceived risk, and increase the likelihood of product trial (Petimar et al., 2023). In the food sector, discounts, in-store tastings of EFPs, and point-of-sale displays enhance product visibility and facilitate the purchasing decision (Herdiyanti et al., 2024).

Beyond influencing consumers' economic rationality, promotions also have a significant impact on the symbolic and emotional dimensions associated with consumption. In contexts characterised by strong cultural involvement, as is the case with EFPs, promotional strategies may alter the social meaning attributed to the act of purchasing (Vigna & Mainardes, 2019).

When consumption is driven by cultural curiosity, promotions can attenuate its symbolic value and shift the focus from identity to economic incentives (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023). Conversely, in contexts with low promotional pressure, purchasing behaviour tends to reflect consumers' sociocultural and identity-based motivations more authentically. The absence of commercial stimuli reinforces symbolic ties to the reference group and the appreciation of the product as a cultural marker (Suntikul et al., 2020). Following this reasoning, Kuo and Helm (2025) argue that promotions act as a situational moderator that conditions the strength of the relationship between social identity and purchasing behaviour.

Empirical studies conducted by Arviv et al. (2024) demonstrate that excessive promotions tend to reduce perceived authenticity and emotional attachment to the product, whereas subtle incentives – such as in-store tastings of EFPs or the provision of contextual information – strengthen experiential engagement and purchase intention (Cengiz & Cengiz, 2023). In the case of EFPs, balancing symbolic motivations and utilitarian stimuli is particularly critical, as consumption often reflects values of belonging and cultural distinction (Maksan et al., 2019). Based on these premises, the fourth research hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 4: Promotions exert a moderating effect on the relationship between social identity and the purchasing behaviour of EFPs, such that this relationship becomes stronger when the level of promotions is low and weaker when the level of promotions is high.

### **1.5. Proposed conceptual model**

Based on the literature review and the hypotheses formulated, the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 was developed. This model illustrates the proposed relationships among social influence, social identity, group norms, promotions, and the purchasing behaviour of EFPs.



belonging to the main retail groups operating in Portugal. Data collection took place at different locations and time periods in order to capture diverse consumer profiles and minimise potential selection biases. Respondents were invited to participate anonymously and voluntarily, after receiving an explanation of the study's objectives and providing informed consent. As an inclusion criterion, participants were required to have prior experience consuming EFPs to ensure that all respondents had real familiarity with the type of product under analysis.

The response rate was high – approximately 95% – which can be attributed to the fact that data collection was conducted among consumers who were directly interacting with EFPs at the time of approach. This procedure enabled the collection of a diverse and robust sample, suitable for analysing the relationships proposed in the theoretical model.

A total of 959 consumers of EFPs participated in the study, 54.1% of whom were female. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 68 years ( $M = 36.58$ ;  $SD = 14.21$ ), with the majority being under 45 years old (65.1%). In terms of educational attainment, 58.9% held at least a bachelor's degree. Regarding average monthly net income, approximately half of the participants (53.0%) reported earning up to €820 (the minimum wage in Portugal), while 43.8% earned above that threshold. A small fraction (3.2%), composed mainly of students, reported having no income.

The sample size meets the methodological requirements recommended for the application of Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), far exceeding the minimum of 200 cases and ensuring a participant-to-parameter ratio greater than 10:1 (Kyriazos, 2018). Although Monte Carlo simulations are often recommended to estimate statistical power in complex models, this was deemed unnecessary in the present study, as the sample size substantially exceeds the adequacy criteria for SEM (Buchberger et al., 2024).

### **2.3. Measures**

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of items adapted from internationally validated scales to ensure content validity and alignment with previous research.

*Social influence.* A composite variable was created comprising nine items that encompass the three subdimensions identified in the literature: evaluative, cognitive, and affective. The items were adapted from Zeng et al. (2009) and reflect the different ways in which consumers are influenced by their reference groups. Example item: *People close to me influence my purchasing choices*. Internal consistency was satisfactory, with  $\alpha = 0.86$  for the evaluative dimension,  $\alpha = 0.86$  for the cognitive dimension,  $\alpha = 0.90$  for the affective dimension, and  $\alpha = 0.94$  for the composite variable.

*Social identity.* This construct was measured using four items adapted from the scale developed by Chen et al. (2018), assessing the degree of belonging, identification, and congruence between self-perception and the group of EFP consumers. Example item: *I feel that I share similar values with other consumers of these products.* The scale showed high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

*Group norms.* Were assessed using a four-item scale adapted from Zeng et al. (2009), defining this construct as the set of values, beliefs, and conventions shared among group members, oriented towards collective benefit and mutual well-being. Example item: *I avoid doing things that may harm the group.* The scale demonstrated adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ). The items were adapted to the context of EFP consumption to reflect consumers' tendency to act in alignment with the norms and values of their reference groups.

*Promotions.* Promotional stimuli were measured using items adapted from Atulkar (2018) and Alalwan (2018), focusing on the perceived attractiveness of promotions and discounts associated with EFPs. Example item: *Promotions influence my decision to purchase EFPs.* The scale exhibited high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

*Purchasing behaviour.* This variable was measured using three items based on the scale by Rook and Fisher (1995), complemented by contributions from Beatty and Ferrell (1998) and Badgaiyan et al. (2016). Example item: *I buy EFPs without prior planning.* Recent studies by Mandolfo and Lamberti (2021) confirm the robustness and psychometric validity of this scale in food consumption contexts. The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

*Response scale.* In the original studies, the variables were measured using five- or seven-point Likert-type scales, depending on the measurement instrument. Considering this diversity, and to ensure comparability among the variables included in the questionnaire, all items were standardised to a five-point response format. This decision was based on two main reasons: (i) five-point scales are widely used in consumer behaviour research as they balance statistical sensitivity with respondent ease (DeCastellarnau, 2018); and (ii) their simplicity enhances response consistency and reduces the likelihood of interpretation errors or cognitive fatigue during questionnaire completion (Koo & Yang, 2025). Accordingly, all items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5), according to participants' level of agreement with each statement. Higher scores indicated stronger agreement and, consequently, greater intensity of the perception or behaviour evaluated.

*Control variables.* Considering that sociodemographic variables such as age and income may influence EFP purchasing behaviour, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted between these variables and the main constructs of the model (social influence, group norms, social identity, promotions, and purchasing behaviour). According to the literature, younger consumers tend to show greater propensity to experiment with ethnic foods, whereas individuals with higher incomes demonstrate a greater willingness to pay for products that stand out for their differentiation and cultural value (El Hadad-Gauthier et al., 2022; Femi-Oladunni et al., 2023).

#### **2.4. Data analysis procedures**

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29) and AMOS (version 29). Preliminary diagnostic tests were conducted to ensure the adequacy of the data for inferential analyses.

Multivariate normality was assessed through Mardia's coefficient (1980), which indicated no severe deviations, confirming the suitability of the maximum likelihood estimation method (Byrne, 2016). The factorial structure of the scales was tested using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), with acceptable model fit indicated by Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) values above 0.90, and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) below 0.08 (Hair et al., 2022).

Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha \geq 0.70$ ) and Composite Reliability ( $CR \geq 0.70$ ). Convergent validity was confirmed through the Average Variance Extracted ( $AVE \geq 0.50$ ), while discriminant validity was verified by comparing the AVE values with the squared correlations among constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

The hypotheses were tested using SEM and Hayes' PROCESS macro (version 4.2), applying Model 21, which allows for the simultaneous examination of mediation and dual moderation effects (Hayes, 2022). In this model, social identity was specified as a mediating variable between social influence and the purchasing behaviour of EFPs, while group norms and promotions were included as moderators in the first and second stages of the mediation, respectively.

The significance of direct, indirect, and conditional effects was estimated using bootstrapping with 5.000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals, ensuring the robustness of statistical inferences (Hayes, 2022).

## **2.5. Ethical considerations**

The study complied with all ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, the objectives of the study were explained to participants, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and the confidentiality of responses. Participation was entirely voluntary and did not involve any form of compensation.

All procedures were conducted in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the ethical guidelines for research in the Social and Behavioural Sciences.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Instituto Superior de Gestão – CIGEST (Reference: CIG\_0010.1/2025, approved on October 30, 2025).

## **2.6. Common method bias control**

As all data were collected through a self-report questionnaire at a single point in time, the potential occurrence of common method bias (CMB) was acknowledged. To mitigate this risk, both *ex ante* and *ex post* procedures were adopted.

At the procedural level, participants' anonymity and response confidentiality were ensured, thereby minimising social desirability bias. The order of items was randomised, and all statements were phrased neutrally to reduce the likelihood of automatic or biased responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

At the statistical level, bias was assessed using two complementary procedures. First, Harman's single-factor test was conducted, and the results indicated that the first factor accounted for 46.0% of the total variance—below the 50.0% threshold—thus suggesting the absence of substantial bias. Acknowledging the limitations of this test, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was also computed for each latent variable in the model. All VIF values were below 3, which is the reference criterion indicating the absence of multicollinearity and significant common method bias (Kock, 2015; Kline, 2023).

Based on these results, it was concluded that common method bias did not compromise the findings of the study.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Preliminary analysis**

As a first step, a preliminary analysis was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the scales and the nature of the relationships among the variables. In this context, monthly income was treated as a continuous variable to allow analysis using Pearson's correlation

coefficient (Hair et al., 2022). Each income category was recoded to the midpoint of its respective range, while the open-ended category “€3001 or above” was represented by €3500.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, CR indices, AVE, Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), and correlations among the constructs. CR values ranged from 0.74 to 0.93, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2022), indicating adequate internal consistency. AVE values ranged between 0.49 and 0.60, being close to or above the reference value of 0.50, thereby supporting convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was overall acceptable: in some dimensions, AVE exceeded MSV, confirming construct distinctiveness, whereas in others it slightly fell below MSV, suggesting minor overlap among theoretical factors (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Pearson correlation coefficients revealed positive and significant associations between purchasing behaviour and social influence ( $r = 0.703$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), social identity ( $r = 0.677$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and promotions ( $r = 0.708$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). These results indicate that both psychosocial and situational factors contribute to consumers’ purchasing decisions regarding EFPs.

Regarding sociodemographic variables, age was negatively correlated with purchasing behaviour ( $r = -0.108$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that younger consumers are more likely to purchase ethnic products, possibly due to greater cultural openness and gastronomic curiosity. Income, however, showed no significant correlations, indicating that EFP purchasing decisions are primarily driven by symbolic and social rather than economic factors.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics, reliability, and correlations among model variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>CR</b>	<b>AVE</b>	<b>MSV</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Purchasing behaviour of EFPs	2.81 <sup>1</sup>	1.03	0.74	0.49	0.91	(0.73)				
2. Social influence	2.73 <sup>1</sup>	1.02	0.93	0.60	0.61	0.703**	(0.94)			
3. Social identity	2.83 <sup>1</sup>	1.04	0.82	0.54	0.47	0.677**	0.681**	(0.82)		
4. Group norms	2.01 <sup>1</sup>	1.02	0.78	0.50	0.25	0.393**	0.521**	0.423**	(0.79)	
5. Promotions	2.91 <sup>1</sup>	0.98	0.80	0.57	0.80	0.708**	0.682**	0.581**	0.413**	(0.82)
Age	36.58	14,20	-	-	-	-0.108**	-0.231**	-0.183**	-0.254**	-0.191**
Monthly net income	1551.55	741.88	-	-	-	0.056	0.038	0.010	-0.009	-0.008

Note: N = 959; \*\* $p < 0.001$ ; M = Mean; SD = Standard-deviation; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; Monthly net income refers to participants' average self-reported net earnings after taxes (in euros).

<sup>1</sup>Scale ranging from 1 to 5; Cronbach's Alpha are in brackets

Source: Author's own work

### **3.2. Measurement model**

The CFA revealed a satisfactory fit to the proposed theoretical model ( $\chi^2_{(192)} = 7.40$ ; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.08, CI90% [0.07, 0.08]), confirming the validity of the factorial structure. According to the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2022) and Kline (2023), CFI and TLI values above 0.90 and RMSEA values below 0.08 indicate an acceptable level of fit between the model and the observed data. These results support the adequacy of the measurement model and the theoretical consistency of the relationships between the indicators and their respective latent constructs.

### **3.3. Structural model**

After confirming the adequacy of the measurement model, the structural model was analysed to test the proposed hypotheses.

#### **3.3.1. Mediation analysis**

The mediation model tested using AMOS demonstrated an adequate fit [ $\chi^2_{(192)} = 7.40$ ; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.90; RMSEA = 0.08, IC90% [0.07, 0.08], confirming the suitability of the proposed theoretical structure.

The results revealed that social influence exerted a direct and positive effect on the purchasing behaviour of EFPs ( $\beta = 0.42$ ; SE = 0.052;  $t = 5.97$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Furthermore, social influence positively predicted social identity ( $\beta = 0.81$ ; SE = 0.044;  $t = 18.19$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), which, in turn, had a significant effect on purchasing behaviour ( $\beta = 0.68$ ; SE = 0.058;  $t = 11.59$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). These results indicate the presence of a partial mediation effect of social identity, thus confirming Hypothesis 2.

The model explained 60% of the variance in social identity and 58% of the variance in purchasing behaviour, demonstrating strong explanatory power. These findings reinforce the SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as they show that the consumption of EFPs is driven not only by utilitarian motivations but also by symbolic processes of belonging and social integration.

#### **3.3.2 Moderated mediation analysis**

After confirming the partial mediation of social identity in the relationship between social influence and purchasing behaviour, the analysis proceeded to examine the moderating effects. For this purpose, Model 21 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) was employed, as it allows the simultaneous assessment of the moderating role of group norms in the relationship between

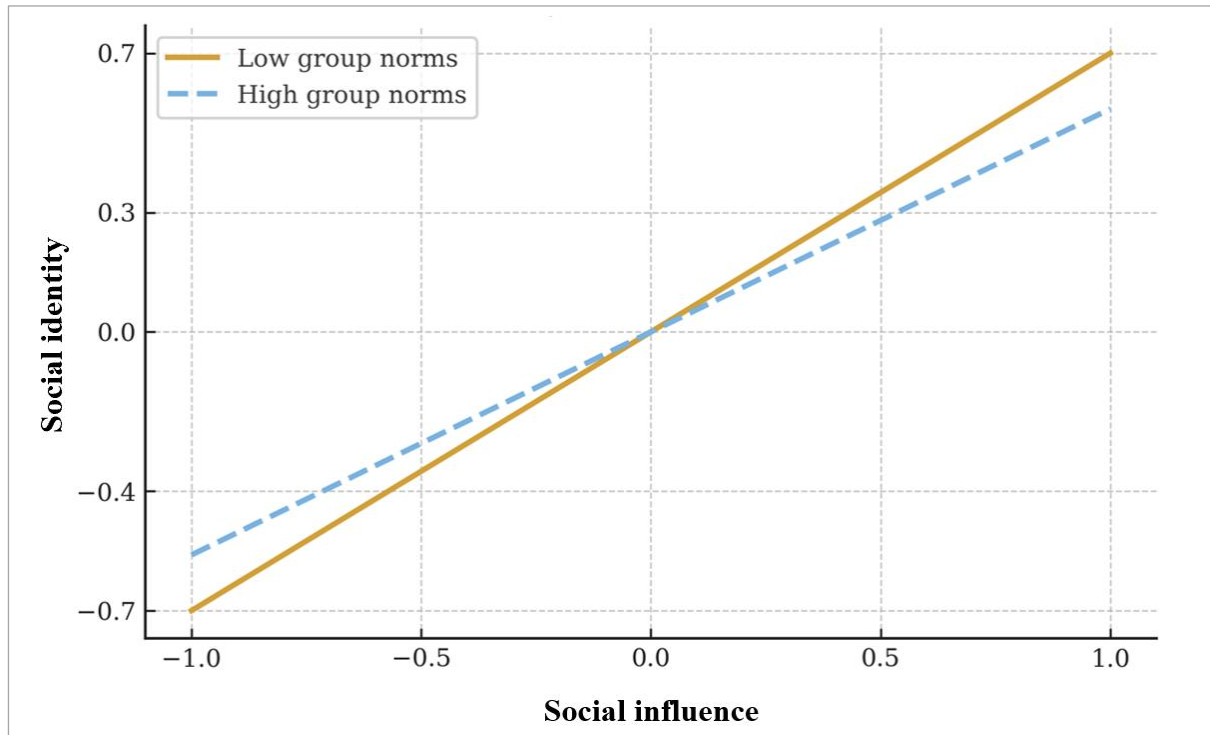
social influence and social identity, and of promotions in the relationship between social identity and purchasing behaviour. This complementary approach enabled a broader evaluation of the conditions under which the observed effects are strengthened or weakened, thus deepening the understanding of the social and situational dynamics associated with the consumption of EFPs.

The results showed that group norms exerted a significant moderating effect on the relationship between social influence and social identity ( $\beta = -0.069$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.005$ ), thereby confirming Hypothesis 3.

Figure 2 graphically illustrates this interaction, showing that the relationship is stronger when group norms are low ( $\beta = 0.70$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and weaker when they are high ( $\beta = 0.56$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In contexts characterised by lower normative rigidity (solid line), social influence has a more pronounced impact on the formation of social identity. As social influence increases, social identity tends to be reinforced, suggesting that individuals belonging to groups with more flexible norms are more susceptible to interpersonal influence and tend to construct their identity based on social interactions and perceptions of others. Conversely, when group norms are high (dashed line), the slope of the relationship becomes less pronounced, indicating that social influence plays a smaller role in the formation of social identity. In such contexts, group membership is primarily determined by pre-established rules and values, reducing the need for individuals to adjust their behaviour in response to peer influence.

**Figure 2**

*Interaction effect of group norms on the relationship between social influence and social identity*



Note. The relationship between social influence and social identity is stronger when group norms are low ( $\beta = 0.70$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and weaker when group norms are high ( $\beta = 0.56$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Source: Author's own work

The results further revealed that promotions significantly moderated the relationship between social identity and purchasing behaviour ( $\beta = -0.081$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.008$ ), thus supporting Hypothesis 4.

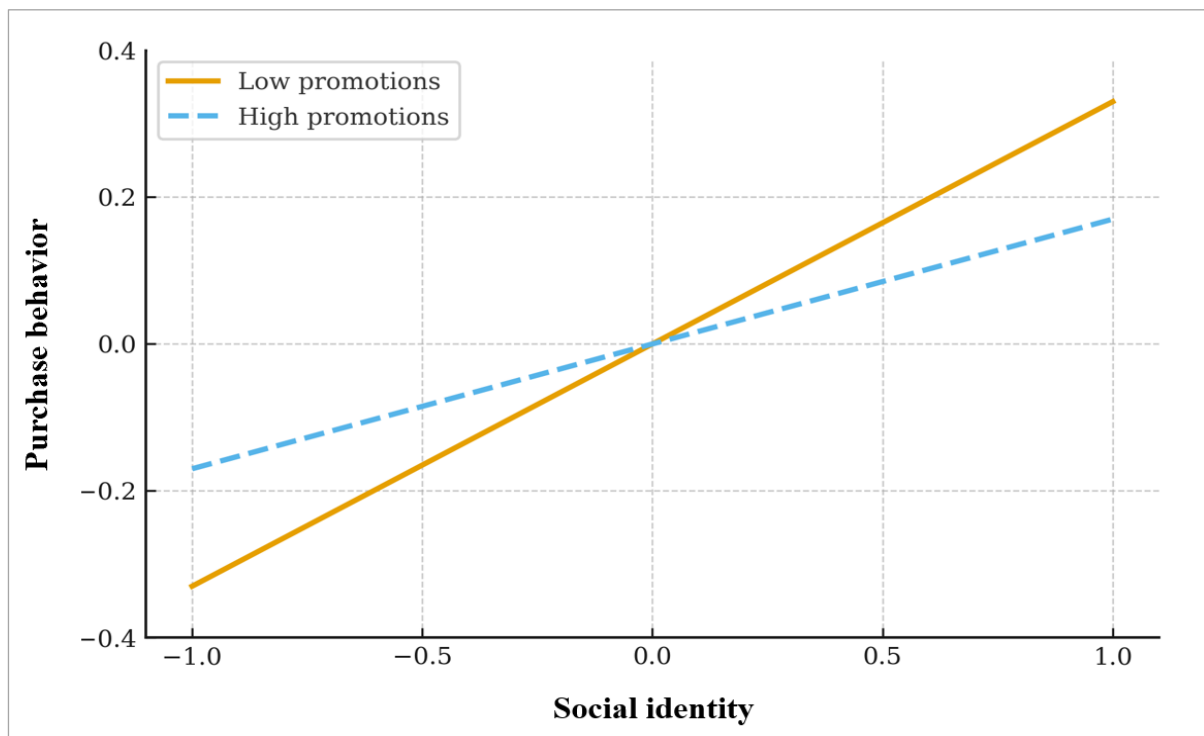
Figure 3 illustrates this interaction, showing that the effect of social identity on purchasing behaviour is stronger when the level of promotions is low ( $\beta = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and decreases as the level of promotions increases ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). When promotions are limited (solid line), the relationship between the two variables becomes more pronounced, indicating that as social identity strengthens, purchasing behaviour intensifies.

This result suggests that in the absence of strong promotional stimuli, the consumption of EFPs is primarily driven by symbolic and identity-related factors, reflecting an emotional connection and sense of belonging to the group. Conversely, when the level of promotions is high (blue line), the slope of the relationship becomes less steep, showing that the impact of social identity weakens and that purchasing behaviour becomes guided by more rational or

economic motivations. These findings demonstrate that the effect of social identity on purchasing behaviour is stronger in contexts with fewer promotional incentives, thereby confirming the moderating role of promotions.

**Figure 3**

*Interaction effect of promotions on the relationship between social identity and purchasing behaviour*



Note. The effect of social identity on purchasing behaviour is stronger when promotions are low ( $\beta = 0.33$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and weakens as the level of promotions increases ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Source: Author's own work

The conditional indirect effect of social influence on purchasing behaviour, mediated by social identity, was found to be significant across all combinations of the moderators' levels (95% IC did not include zero). However, the magnitude of the indirect effect varied according to group norms and promotions, confirming the existence of a dual moderated mediation (index = 0.006; 95% CI [0.002, 0.011]).

These results validate the proposed hypotheses and demonstrate that social influence affects the purchasing behaviour of EFPs directly, indirectly (through mediation), and conditionally, under the contextual influence of group norms and promotional stimuli. To

ensure an integrated and robust analytical approach, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested using SEM, whereas Hypotheses 3 and 4 were assessed through the PROCESS macro (Model 21).

**Table 2***Results of hypothesis testing: direct, indirect, and moderated effects*

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Paths</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>LLCI</b>	<b>ULCI</b>	<b>Result</b>
Hypothesis 1	Social influence → Purchasing behaviour EFPs	0.420	0.052	5.840	< 0.001	0.133	0.268	Supported
Hypothesis 2	Social influence → Social identity → Purchasing behaviour EFPs	0.210	-	-	-	0.149	0.267	Supported (partial mediation)
Hypothesis 3	Social influence × Group norms → Social identity	-0.069	0.022	-3.156	0.002	-0.111	-0.026	Supported
Hypothesis 4	Social identity × Promotions → Purchasing behaviour EFPs	-0.081	0.020	-4.119	< 0.001	-0.120	-0.043	Supported

Note.  $\beta$  = Standardised coefficient; SE = Standard Error; LLCI/ULCI = Lower and Upper Limits of the 95% Confidence Interval, obtained with 5,000 bootstrap samples. For direct and moderating effects (H1, H3, and H4), significance was assessed using t and p values. In the case of H2 (indirect effect), SE, t, and p values are not reported because the mediated effect results from the product of two coefficients (X→M and M→Y), whose distribution is non-normal. Its significance was determined through the bootstrap confidence interval, with the effect considered significant when the 95% CI does not include zero.

Source: Author's own work based on results from AMOS and PROCESS (Model 21; Hayes, 2022).

The results confirm that social influence affects the purchasing behaviour of EFPs both directly and indirectly, through social identity, with this mediation being conditioned by group norms and promotions. The model showed that purchase decisions do not depend solely on utilitarian factors but also on psychosocial and situational processes, reinforcing the theoretical relevance of the proposed hypotheses.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study deepened the understanding of the psychosocial and situational mechanisms that shape EFP purchasing behaviour, highlighting the role of social influence, social identity, group norms, and promotions. The data analysis revealed that EFP consumption goes beyond utilitarian motivations and is strongly driven by symbolic, relational, and contextual factors.

The findings demonstrated that social influence has a direct and positive effect on purchasing behaviour, thus confirming the first hypothesis. This evidence supports the core premise of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individual behaviour is shaped by perceptions of belonging and by the norms of significant social groups. Social influence becomes particularly salient when consumption involves strong cultural symbolism, as in the case of EFPs, where the act of purchase transcends utility and reflects identity-based affinities (Liu et al., 2019). Similar conclusions were drawn by Çoker et al. (2022), who found that consumers tend to align their choices with the expectations of family members, friends, or reference communities, especially in culturally embedded contexts. Hammami et al. (2023) further observed that, in the food domain, social conformity often operates as a mechanism of validation and acceptance, explaining the tendency to reproduce group habits and preferences. This finding is consistent with the work of Manzi et al. (2023), who highlighted the role of interpersonal influence in the adoption of culturally symbolic products. Likewise, Bar-On and Lamm (2023) showed that the need for social approval is a determining factor in consumer decisions. Therefore, EFP purchasing behaviour reflects not only individual preferences but also social integration and identity affirmation dynamics.

The study also found that social identity acts as a mediating variable between social influence and purchasing behaviour, confirming the second hypothesis. This result shows that social influence operates not only directly but also through the sense of belonging and the symbolic value of consumption (Hogg et al., 2017). Liu et al. (2019) argue that social identity represents a central dimension of the self-concept, guiding individuals' attitudes and behaviours within their reference groups. In line with this, Karacaoğlu and Cankül (2024) describe food

consumption as a symbolic form of expression that characterises both the individual and their group membership. Similarly, Campos et al. (2024) emphasised that the adoption of culturally distinctive foods can serve as a means of social distinction and identity construction. These conclusions are aligned with those of Goel et al. (2023), who view food as a cultural and emotional expression capable of evoking nostalgia, pleasure, and discovery. Consequently, social identity strengthens the bond between the individual and the group, transforming the act of purchase into a gesture of belonging.

The third hypothesis was also supported, as results revealed that group norms moderate the relationship between social influence and social identity, with the association being stronger when group norms are less rigid. Monterrosa et al. (2020) reported similar findings, showing that in groups with flexible norms, social identity tends to be shaped by interpersonal interactions, whereas rigid norms constrain external influence. This aligns with Çoker et al. (2022), who conceptualised social norms as behavioural regulators, whose strength depends on the degree of cohesion and group identification. Liu et al. (2019) also demonstrated that norm strength influences how consumers internalise collective values, affecting both identity flexibility and the propensity to adopt new products. In the same vein, Cengiz and Cengiz (2023) observed that in groups more open to diversity, EFP consumption is perceived as socially legitimate and valued, while in more conservative groups it may be seen as deviant behaviour. These findings suggest that social norms have the potential to reinforce group cohesion but can also restrict identity expression.

Finally, it was found that promotions moderate the relationship between social identity and purchasing behaviour, with the relationship being stronger when the level of promotions is low. This result demonstrates that EFP consumption is more authentic, symbolic, and identity-driven in the absence of economic incentives, thus confirming the fourth hypothesis. This finding is consistent with Maksan et al. (2019), who observed that excessive promotions can diminish the symbolic value of ethnic products and shift consumer attention from cultural to economic motivations. Similarly, Cengiz and Cengiz (2023) argued that situational factors at the point of sale can influence the transition from purchase intention to actual behaviour. Herdiyanti et al. (2024) added that overexposure to promotional stimuli tends to weaken emotional attachment and compromise the authenticity of EFP consumption. Likewise, Arviv et al. (2024) showed that promotions may distort perceptions of authenticity, shifting consumer focus from cultural engagement to economic benefit. Can et al. (2025) reinforced this

perspective by demonstrating that promotional saturation reduces the symbolic value associated with products.

Overall, these results indicate that EFP purchasing behaviour results from a dynamic process in which social influence, social identity, and contextual factors interact in complex ways, integrating symbolic, emotional, and rational dimensions.

#### **4.1. Theoretical and practical contributions**

This research provides relevant contributions to consumer behaviour studies and draws attention to the implementation of marketing strategies in multicultural contexts.

At a theoretical level, it reinforces the applicability of SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to the field of food consumption, highlighting that belonging to reference groups and the pursuit of social recognition are central dimensions in the purchasing decisions of culturally distinctive products. The simultaneous integration of psychosocial and situational variables in a moderated mediation model enhances the understanding of consumer behaviour, as it articulates symbolic, emotional, and contextual dimensions within a single analytical framework. This approach shows that purchasing behaviour does not depend solely on individual factors but rather emerges from the interaction between social influences, group norms, and market stimuli, contributing to a more systemic and interdisciplinary understanding of EFP consumption.

The findings further demonstrate that the effects of social influence manifest indirectly through social identity, which acts as a mechanism of internalisation and symbolic expression of belonging. This evidence underscores the importance of incorporating mediating and moderating variables into explanatory models of consumer behaviour, moving beyond linear approaches that tend to oversimplify social dynamics in purchasing decisions. Consequently, the study contributes to the consolidation of a theoretical body that acknowledges the role of interpersonal relationships and identity perceptions in consumption, with implications for cultural marketing, diversity management, and intercultural communication.

From a practical perspective, the study offers useful insights for managers operating in food retail and distribution. The finding that promotions can attenuate the symbolic and identity-related value associated with EFP consumption highlights the need to develop balanced promotional strategies that preserve product authenticity and enhance its cultural meaning. Instead of relying on aggressive price discounting, companies should prioritise communication strategies that emphasise the origin, heritage, and cultural experience associated with products, thereby increasing emotional engagement with the brand.

The influence exerted by reference groups and social networks suggests that marketing strategies should incorporate social validation mechanisms, such as consumer testimonials, experience sharing, and the reinforcement of consumption communities. Developing messages that celebrate diversity and cultural exchange can strengthen consumers' identity connections and broaden the market acceptance of EFPs. Based on these conclusions, brands and retailers can design authentic communication strategies that foster a sense of belonging and promote inclusive cultural experiences.

Understanding the cultural profile of consumers and adapting communication strategies to different audience segments can help firms value both diversity and authenticity in more open segments, while emphasising trust and tradition in more norm-driven ones.

#### **4.2. Limitations and future research directions**

Although this research offers meaningful theoretical and practical contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, the use of a cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of definitive causal relationships among the analysed variables. While the proposed model showed satisfactory statistical fit, future studies should employ longitudinal designs to capture the evolution of consumption behaviours over time and assess the stability of relationships among social influence, identity, and situational context.

The sample, although large and diverse, was obtained using a non-probabilistic convenience method, which may limit the generalisation of findings to other populations or cultural settings. Therefore, future research should consider the use of representative samples and include participants from different geographical regions to compare EFP consumption patterns across various cultural and socioeconomic environments.

Another limitation arises from the self-reported nature of the data, which may introduce social desirability bias, particularly in questions related to group norms or cultural appreciation. Future studies are encouraged to employ mixed-method approaches combining quantitative data with direct observation and semi-structured interviews, to capture emotional and symbolic dimensions that standardised instruments tend to simplify.

From a conceptual standpoint, future research could explore additional mediating or moderating variables that interact with social identity. Constructs such as cultural familiarity, food neophilia, or perceived authenticity could further explain the psychological mechanisms underpinning EFP consumption. Integrating these variables may strengthen explanatory models

and enrich the understanding of the symbolic and emotional motivations associated with food diversity.

Finally, future investigations should test the applicability of this model in other cultural consumption sectors (e.g., fashion, tourism, entertainment) to examine whether the dynamics among social influence, identity, and situational factors remain consistent. Such an approach would help assess the theoretical robustness of the model and support the development of culturally adapted marketing strategies across different industries.

## **Conclusion**

This research sought to understand the psychosocial and situational factors influencing the purchasing behaviour of EFPs through a moderated mediation model. The results confirmed that social influence exerts both direct and indirect effects on purchasing behaviour, mediated by social identity and conditioned by group norms and promotions. These findings demonstrate that EFP consumption is a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing symbolic, relational, and contextual dimensions that shape purchasing intentions.

By revealing that group norms and promotions shape the strength of the relationships among psychosocial variables, the study contributes to a more nuanced and realistic understanding of multicultural consumer behaviour. In contexts characterised by lower normative rigidity, social influence intensifies identity construction and encourages greater openness to food diversity. Conversely, the reduced effect of identity under strong promotional stimuli suggests that culturally motivated consumption can be displaced by economic incentives, underscoring the need for marketing strategies that preserve authenticity and symbolic value.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the integration of psychosocial and situational factors within a single explanatory model, demonstrating that purchasing decisions emerge from processes of social belonging, interpersonal influence, and contextual stimuli. The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of marketing strategies depends on balancing economic rationality with cultural coherence. Brands capable of translating diversity and authenticity into meaningful consumption experiences will be better positioned to create value and foster customer loyalty in multicultural markets.

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## Appendix – Statement from the ISG/CIGEST Ethics Committee



Ethics Commission ISG / CIGEST

Reference: CIG\_0010.1/2025

Date: October 30, 2025

Requested by: Professor Rosa Isabel Rodrigues

Title: "Eating to belong: How social identity, group norms and promotions shape ethnic food consumption"

Authors: Rosa Rodrigues, Sandra Gomes and Maria Madalena Carlos Carvalho Falé dos Santos

The Ethics Committee of Instituto Superior de Gestão / CIGEST reviewed your application to obtain ethical assessment for your manuscript. Documents were analysed by professor Miguel Varela, Professor Ricardo Ferro and Professor Mariana Marques.

The commission has reviewed the manuscript and the questionnaire, validating that anonymity and confidentiality have been assured. Also, the commission notices that an informed consent was presented to the participants. None of the researchers participating in this study took part in the decision making and voting procedure for this assessment.

Based on the documents review, the EC-ISG/CIGEST states a favorable ethical opinion about the request.



President of Ethics Commission ISG / CIGEST

Ethics Commission ISG / CIGEST, Rua Professor Reinaldo dos Santos, nº 46 A, 1500-552 Lisboa (Benfica)