Ethnic dining: Need to belong, need to be unique, and menu offering

Stephanie Qing Liu [a,*], Anna S. Mattila [b,1]

[a] School of Hospitality Management, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Mateer Building, University Park, PA 16802, United States
[b] School of Hospitality Management, The Pennsylvania State University, 224 Mateer Building, University Park, PA 16802, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Many ethnic restaurants "Americanize" their menus to cater to mainstream American customers' palate; on the other hand, they offer a "secret" (more authentic) menu to their original, ethnic customers. Inspired by consumer online reviews reflecting "secret menus" in ethnic restaurants, this research examines the joint impact of offering an authentic menu and the presence of other customers on customer satisfaction. Results from this study show that mainstream American customers' satisfaction decreases when an authentic menu is not offered. The moderated mediation analysis further demonstrates that authentic menu offering influences satisfaction through the activation of two distinct psychological motivations, depending on the ethnic composition of other customers. Specifically, being surrounded by Asian (Caucasian) customers activates the need to belong (need to be unique) when an authentic menu is not offered. Such heightened psychological needs consequently lead to declines in customer satisfaction. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The following review entitled "Don't miss their Secret menu" appeared on TripAdvisor:

"Last night I went there (Budai restaurant) with a friend. I was early and had a chance to study the menu as I waited. . . It didn't seem as interesting as I had remembered. As I sat there, someone's dinner caught my eye as it passed (in the waitress' hand). When she came back on her way to the kitchen, I asked her about it, and in her very limited English, she told me to talk to the boss. Shortly, thereafter, I did, and when I asked her (the boss) about the dish, she brought me an entirely different menu. It was the 'authentic' menu, the one they save for whom. . . I don't know. But once I had it, that was it. When my friend arrived and told me to order, I ordered three entrees for us, including two dishes of offal. The three were the best dishes I have had in a Chinese restaurant since moving here nearly five years ago. I suggested that the 'authentic' menu be included in the regular menu, handed to all customers with a title, for the adventurous and daring.

- 68travelingjeff68, Albuquerque, New Mexico"

Experiencing authentic cuisines and cultures is a primary goal of ethnic dining (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Roseman, 2006; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). Accordingly, authenticity is one of the key factors influencing customer evaluations of ethnic restaurants (Jang et al., 2012; Lego et al., 2002; Roseman, 2006; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007; Tsai and Lu, 2012). However, many ethnic restaurants have adapted their dishes to better match the American palate by avoiding some authentic ingredients (CNN, 2010; The Daily Meal, 2013). In order to keep their original customers happy, many ethnic restaurants also have a second, more authentic menu. (This practice is prevalent as thousands of online posts can be found by conducting a search using the keywords "ethnic restaurant" and "secret menu.") At first glance, the two-menu strategy sounds like a win-win situation. However, research examining customers' reactions to Americanized vs. authentic menus is lacking.

Previous research on ethnic dining mainly focuses on factors such as authenticity, atmosphere, service quality, food quality, and price (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Jang et al., 2012; Liu and Jang, 2009a,b), but the hospitality literature offers little guidance on the role of customers' specific psychological needs (need for belongingness and need for uniqueness) in influencing their satisfaction. This neglect is surprising because the pursuit of authenticity, indeed, can be interpreted as gaining belongingness to and exploring the uniqueness of a foreign culture (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Lego et al., 2002; Molz, 2004; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). Inspired by the "secret menu" debate, this research investigates the impact of offering (vs.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 814 753 0067; fax: +1 814 863 4257.
  E-mail addresses: qing@psu.edu (S.Q. Liu), asm6@psu.edu (A.S. Mattila).
[1] Tel.: +1 814 863 5757; fax: +1 814 863 4257.

not offering) an authentic menu on customer satisfaction. To understand customers' reactions to the secret-menu strategy in a greater depth, this study examines the mediating roles of customers' psychological motivations. We propose that need to belong and need to be unique are the underlying mechanisms explaining why mainstream American customers react negatively when an authentic menu is absent. We further argue that the ethnic composition of other customers (i.e., Asian vs. Caucasian) determines which of the two motivations is salient in a given ethnic dining experience.

2. Background literature

2.1. Authenticity and ethnic dining

With the fast growth of international trade, immigration, and tourism, the United States has an increasingly diverse population embracing many different cultures. Consequently, the hospitality industry has witnessed a boom in ethnic restaurants over the past couple of decades. The ethnic foodservice industry is now mainstream, generating about $49 billion in annual sales in the United States (Casella et al., 2009). While lifestyle changes make dining out more common, ethnic restaurants serve as interesting options to everyone. In fact, 75% ethnic food is consumed by Caucasian customers (International Markets Bureau, 2010). Ethnic food has long been viewed as a cultural symbol representing national identity (Edles, 2004), and in today's multiethnic American society, ethnic food plays an important role to help bridge cultural barriers (Cook, 1997). By patronizing ethnic restaurants, mainstream American customers can learn about foreign cultures and explore exotic and unique flavors (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Lego et al., 2002; Molz, 2004; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007).

Fearing that mainstream American customers might not like the original taste of ethnic dishes, many ethnic restaurants have modified their recipes to be less spicy and sweeter. Ironically, ethnic restaurants often serve food that American customers mistakenly view as a symbol of authenticity (Eater, 2011; The Daily Meal, 2013). For instance, "General Tso's Chicken" and "Beef with Broccoli" are very popular Chinese dishes in the United States, but you can hardly find these dishes in China. "Fortune Cookies" is another example of fake Chinese food; in fact, they were invented by a Californian bakery in the early 1900s (Eater, 2011; The Daily Meal, 2013).

While ethnic restaurants tailor their menus to mainstream American customers, they are not giving up on their ethnic customers. As a business strategy, ethnic restaurants offer an extra, authentic menu to please their ethnic customers who prefer the more original flavors (CNN, 2010; Today, 2012). Dishes on the authentic menu often use ingredients that an average American considers as strange or intolerable, such as pla raa (Isan-style fermented fish), cha-om (acacia pennata), and pickled crabs in Thai cuisine (CNN, 2010). Consequently, the more authentic menu is hidden from mainstream American customers in order to avoid confusion. However, such a strategy might backfire. Although not all mainstream American customers are ready to try real Chinese food, they still might want to know what is authentic to real Chinese customers. The absence of opportunities to learn about and experience authentic foreign cultures may consequently have a negative impact on customers' dining experience in an ethnic restaurant. Therefore, we expect that customers will feel less satisfied when they are not given a chance to look at an authentic menu. This leads us to propose the following:

H1. The focal Caucasian customer will exhibit lower satisfaction with the dining experience when an authentic menu is not offered (vs. offered).

2.2. Need to belong and need to be unique

The desire for social belonging is a fundamental need of human beings (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). From an evolutionary perspective, human beings are motivated to cultivate social bonds because group sharing (e.g., food, care) and cooperation (e.g., hunting large animals) provide critical survival and reproduction benefits (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In Maslow (1968) hierarchy of needs, the need for belongingness arises as long as survival and safety needs (e.g., food, water, shelter) are satisfied, and takes precedence over the higher level esteem and self-actualization needs. Feelings of social exclusion emerge when an individual is isolated or ostracized by other individuals or social groups (Baumeister et al., 2005; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007). Extensive research indicates that the experience of exclusion is highly aversive (Jetten et al., 2001; Schmitt and Branscombe, 2001; Tajfel, 1978; Williams, 2002) and has pervasive impact on human's psychological and physiological functioning (Baumeister et al., 2002, 2005; Eisenberger et al., 2003; Twenge et al., 2002). Thus, people constantly monitor their levels of social inclusion and when the inclusion level becomes undesirable, they actively seek opportunities to foster interpersonal connections (DeWall et al., 2009; Gardner et al., 2000; Leary et al., 1995). Moreover, previous research suggests that excluded individuals tend to exhibit conformity behaviors to enhance their chance of social acceptance (DeWall et al., 2009; Mead et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2000). For instance, Mead et al. (2011) reveal that socially excluded individuals are more likely to spend money on products symbolizing group membership (e.g., university wristbands) and mirror the group member's spending preferences. In addition, those socially excluded people are willing to pay higher prices for an unappealing food item (e.g., chicken feet) that is expressly liked by a group member.

People also have a fundamental need to differentiate themselves from others (Lynn and Snyder, 2002; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). The motivation for individual uniqueness is highly congruent with the American culture because: (1) individualism is a core value of the American society and (2) Americans tend to adopt independent self-views (Bellah et al., 2007; Kim and Markus, 1999). Consequently, freely expressing the true self and standing out from the group is strongly encouraged in the United States, while mirroring other people is not preferred. Empirical evidence suggests that threats to feelings of uniqueness result in negative emotional reactions, for instance, increased levels of anxiety (Fromkin, 1970; Lynn and Snyder, 2002; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Therefore, when feeling overly similar to others, people tend to behave in ways that make them feel differentiated (Byrne and Griffitt, 1969; Fromkin, 1968; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). More central to the current study, previous research shows that consumers can signal their uniqueness to others through consumption choices, specifically, by preferring distinctive products or products that a minority of people prefer (Ames and Iyengar, 2005; Berger and Heath, 2007; Chan et al., 2012; Lynn and Harris, 1997; Mead et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2001; Wan et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2012). It has been observed that people exhibit divergent behaviors in order to increase social distance and establish uniqueness (Berger and Heath, 2007; Chan et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2012). For example, Xu et al. (2012) demonstrate that when invaded by overly close others (i.e., physical proximity), people are motivated to reassert their individuality by preferring the distinctive product (e.g., unique color or shape).

While a large body of literature treats need for belongingness and need for uniqueness as stable individual traits (e.g., Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Brewer, 1991; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Tian et al., 2001), recent research examines them as situational motivations (e.g., Huang et al., 2014; Loveland et al., 2010; Maimaran