Enhancing ethnic food acceptance and reducing perceived risk: The effects of personality traits, cultural familiarity, and menu framing

SooCheong (Shawn) Jang [a,*], DongHee Kim [b,1]

[a] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University, Marriott Hall, Room 245, 900 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA
[b] School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Purdue University, Marriott Hall, 900 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA

A B S T R A C T

This study examined whether innate food-related personality traits (food neophobia), as well as food external factors such as cultural familiarity and menu framing, influence U.S. customers' reluctance to try ethnic foods. In order to achieve this aim, this study first investigated whether familiarity with cultural contents (e.g., music or movies) helps reduce the perceived risk of ethnic foods and, further, whether it increases acceptance of novel foods. Second, food related behaviors, willingness to try ethnic foods and perceived risk, were examined under various menu conditions with different visual and verbal information frames using a sample of U.S. consumers with varying levels of food neophobia. The results empirically suggest that increasing familiarity with Korean culture through exposure to Korean lifestyles, music, movies, and soap operas could alleviate food neophobia as a barrier to accepting novel ethnic foods. Moreover, the results of the scenario experiments indicate that the menu design format can serve as a tool not only to increase customers' willingness to accept ethnic foods, but also to reduce the perceived risks of trying ethnic foods.

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1. Introduction

A growing demand for ethnic restaurants and ethnic food markets has been observed in the U.S. (Strom, 2013). Many U.S. consumers crave more variety in their food consumption experiences due to the influence of ethnic diversity, globally sourced food, cultural experiences, and media exposure (Verbeke and López, 2005). With this increasing global demand for ethnic foods, there are growing efforts to establish marketing strategies with the potential to attract global customers toward emerging ethnic food markets (Jang et al., 2009). According to the National Restaurant Association (2012), popular ethnic foods in the U.S. include Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, and Thai cuisines. These ethnic cuisines are considered successful in the U.S. market because each has developed a 'food culture' since the 1960s when huge numbers of immigrants arrived in the U.S. (Lu and Fine, 1995). However, novel cuisines, such as Korean food, still encounter many challenges entering the U.S. market (Jang et al., 2009). Despite the Korean government's campaign to globalize Korean cuisine, it has yet to become a fixture of American or European culture (Korean Cuisine to the World, 2009).

Although ethnic food restaurants have become an important component of the foodservice industry, the literature has yet to address how ethnic restaurants become successful. This study contributes to the literature by considering U.S. consumers' food related behaviors. Food-related consumer behaviors are transformed and influenced by various factors that can be categorized as food-internal factors (e.g., food neophobia) and food-external factors (e.g., information and social factors) (Eertmans et al., 2001; Pliner and Hobden, 1992).

One food internal factor that is specifically related to food choices is food neophobia. Humans' omnivorous nature explains people's fear or reluctance to eat novel or unfamiliar foods (Rozin and Vollmecke, 1986). That is, throughout history humans have viewed ingesting novel foods as potentially harmful. Previous research has provided evidence to support that willingness to eat novel foods decreases as the belief that novel foods could be potentially harmful increases. Pliner and Hobden (1992) characterized food-related personality traits as individual differences in terms of avoiding a range of edibles. Food neophobia is more likely to protect an individual from consuming potentially harmful foods, while food neophilia increases the likelihood of trying a wide variety of foods. However, although ethnic foods are considered potentially harmful to certain food neophobic groups, there is little work identifying the food related personality traits that affect attitudes toward ethnic foods and ethnic restaurants (Tuorila et al., 2001). Further, there

is little work identifying the factors that contribute to acceptance of unfamiliar foods or reducing the perceived risk of unfamiliar foods. Yet, in order to introduce new foods into the U.S. market successfully, it is critical to reduce the fear of novel foods.

To reduce the perceived danger or harm associated with unfamiliarity, this study focused on two external factors that may drive ethnic food acceptance: cultural and information factors. First, we modeled the relationship among food neophobia, the consumer's level of familiarity with a country's culture, and behaviors toward ethnic foods. Cultural familiarity with a cuisine's country of origin is an external factor that reduces uncertainty toward novel ethnic foods (Park and Lessig, 1981). Previous research found that the cultural image of a country serves as a halo from which consumers perceive a food's safety or quality (Min Han, 1989). Popular cultural content – including television dramas, movies, pop music, and associated media – can encourage "learned safety." Pop culture can foster interest in a culture and provide consumers with a broader knowledge of the country, which can help create a desire for ethnic cuisines. Therefore, different levels of cultural familiarity can affect U.S. customers with different levels of food neophobia.

Another food-external factor that may enhance ethnic food acceptance is information framing on menus, which can also reduce uncertainty (Eertmans et al., 2001). Previous studies have shown that how information is presented can modify an individual's willingness to try novel foods (Tuorila et al., 1994). Although previous studies found that verbal information generally increases the acceptance of novel foods, most effective format may differ based on customers' involvement or product knowledge (Haugtvedt et al., 1992; Tuorila et al., 1994). Prior research has shown that for customers with lower levels of knowledge and experience visual information is generally considered appropriate (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Thus, differences in food-related personality traits and familiarity with a food may alter which type of menu format is most effective. To fully understand the role of information and menu design in a restaurant setting, it is vital to comprehend which types of information effectively influence acceptance of ethnic foods across food neophobic traits.

Thus, this study examined food-external factors that could moderate or attenuate individual food-internal traits in order to increase American consumers' willingness to try Korean foods. The specific objectives of this study were (1) to examine the impact of food-related personality traits on U.S. customers' behaviors toward Korean foods; (2) to investigate whether experience with Korean pop culture, including lifestyles, music, and movies, was sufficient to reduce perceived risk and increase willingness to try Korean foods; and (3) to identify effective menu design framings in terms of reducing perceived risk and enhancing acceptance of Korean foods.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethnic foods: willingness to try and perceived risk

New ethnic restaurants face many challenges when they attempt to achieve mainstream success in U.S. markets (Jang et al., 2012; Phillips et al., 2013). One challenge is knowing how to appeal to customers who have limited exposure to ethnic restaurants (Ha and Jang, 2010). Since the unknown causes fear, U.S. consumers may consider ethnic foods exotic and be reluctant to try this unknown type of food. Therefore, a growing body of related studies has focused on specific restaurant marketing strategies to attract potential U.S. consumers to ethnic restaurants, such as service quality perceptions (Ha and Jang, 2010), the role of authenticity (Jang et al., 2012), and having an image of the country or subjective knowledge of ethnic cuisine (Phillips et al., 2013).

However, there are still relatively few studies that identify fundamental factors that cause consumers to be reluctant to choose ethnic foods or perceive them as risky. This study intends to contribute to the under-researched field of U.S. consumers' acceptance of novel ethnic foods and perceived risk, which are associated with both internal food-related personality traits and food-external factors.

According to Rozin and Vollmecke (1986), people appear to be cautious by nature about accepting novel foods due to perceived danger. However, the acceptance or rejection of ethnic foods may be motivated by a variety of factors. For example, an individual's reaction to novel foods might be affected by cultural familiarity (or a lack there of), sensory affective factors, or perceived risk (Barrena and Sánchez, 2013). Based on this notion, the acceptance or rejection of ethnic foods cannot be understood without examining innate food-related personality traits.

In order to provide a deeper understanding of U.S. consumers' behaviors toward ethnic restaurants, we recognized that behaviors toward ethnic foods are likely to be multidimensional. Thus, rather than arguing that behaviors toward ethnic foods are simply positive or negative, individuals can simultaneously have positive *and* negative reactions toward ethnic foods. For example, an individual's behavior toward the consumption of ethnic foods may be positive in terms of enjoying new tastes, while simultaneously being negatively impacted by perceived risk. Food choices have long been associated with such ambivalence (Beardsworth, 1995). Accordingly, the current study is concerned with both willingness to try ethnic foods (positive) and perceived risk toward ethnic foods (negative). Further, behaviors toward food choices can be transformed by not just individual differences, but situational differences as well (Pliner and Salvy, 2006). Thus, this study aims to explore which internal personality traits and external factors (cultural and information factors) boost positive food-related behaviors and reduce perceived risk.

2.2. Food neophobia

According to the 'omnivore's dilemma' (Rozin and Vollmecke, 1986), humans should be very cautious toward novel foods in order to protect themselves from the risks associated with ingesting a harmful substance. At the same time, humans also approach novel foods in order to capitalize on the advantages of being omnivorous. Thus, food-related personality traits have been highlighted as an important driver of novel food choices (Pliner and Salvy, 2006). Food neophobia, an individual personality trait, is defined as the extent to which consumers are reluctant to try novel foods (Pliner and Hobden, 1992). Thus, individuals who are food neophobic prefer the taste of familiar foods (McFarlane and Pliner, 1997). Conversely, food neophobia is negatively associated with variety seeking in food choices (Eertmans et al., 2001). Several studies reported that high levels of food neophobia have a significant impact on the actual evaluation or taste of unfamiliar foods (e.g., Tuorila et al., 1994). In contrast, food neophilics, who are more open to trying new foods, positively evaluated unfamiliar ethnic foods (Raudenbush and Frank, 1999). There is also substantial evidence that these traits affect an individual's receptivity to novel foods from other cultures (Sassatelli and Scott, 2001). For example, Finnish participants with high levels of food neophobia were less likely to have tasted unfamiliar ethnic foods (Pohjalainen and Lotti, 2001). Food-related personality traits also play an important role in predicting U.S. consumers' willingness to try unfamiliar foods, such as Asian cuisines (Hwang and Lin, 2010). Overall, food neophobic consumers have higher negative evaluations of unfamiliar foods than the food neophilic consumers. Based on this perspective, we proposed the following hypotheses: