



The effects of likability of Korean celebrities, dramas, and music on preferences for Korean restaurants: A mediating effect of a country image of Korea

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ABSTRACT

With the globalization of Korean cuisine and wide acceptance of Korean contemporary culture (popular culture, sometimes “pop” culture), this study pursues an investigation of the influences of Korean popular culture on preferences for Korean restaurants through a country image of Korea. In addition, the study compares the relative influences of three major segments of Korean popular culture (Korean celebrities, Korean television dramas, and Korean popular music) on an image of Korea. A survey of 2836 residents in four international cities (Hong Kong, Bangkok, Sydney, and Dubai) shows that likability of Korean celebrities had the most significant influence on a country image of Korea, followed by Korean television dramas, but likability of Korean popular music did not affect Korea’s image. The findings show that a country image of Korea positively influenced preferences for Korean restaurants, and reveal regional differences in the effects of Korean popular culture on preferences for Korean restaurants among the four cities. This study is unique in both academia and industry for its investigation of the influence of Korean popular culture by classifying Korean popular culture into different major segments of Korean popular culture, Korean celebrities, Korean television dramas, and Korean popular music. This study is beneficial to restaurant operators and governments by providing the information for developing strategies for expanding ethnic restaurants into global markets and formulating governmental and industrial policies for globalization of ethnic food and restaurant industries.

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1. Introduction

Ethnic food consumption has become a global phenomenon due to the popularity of television cooking shows and an increase in international travel (Mintel, 2009). Estimates of ethnic food sales in the U.S., including the total sales of ethnic restaurants and ethnic food materials (e.g. fresh herbs, vegetables, fruits, sauces, and spices) will reach \$2.7 billion in 2015 (Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, 2012). Asian foods, consisting of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisines, constituted 28% of the ethnic food market in the US with sales growing swiftly and reaching \$600 million in 2009 (Mintel, 2009). The trends for

healthy eating and interests in novel Asian cuisines have fueled this growth in the world.

In particular, Korean food is gaining popularity worldwide, and consumers throughout the globe have revealed interests in the culture of Korean food (Seo et al., 2012). A report from the National Restaurants Association in 2011 indicated that Korean cuisine ranked the seventh among trendy ethnic cuisines and flavors, outdistancing Latin American and Mediterranean cuisines. This percentage has increased by 12% from the previous year with regard to preferences for Korean food, which was driven in the global market by its healthy and nutritionally balanced attributes (Jang et al., 2012).

Korean popular culture, a major trend in pan-Asia (Onishi, 2005), has expanded its influence to the U.S., Middle East, and Europe. The new popularity enhances familiarity with Korea and improves awareness of Korean brands among international consumers (Cha and Kim, 2011). Based on this notion, Korean companies in the global market, such as Samsung and LG, developed “collaboration-strategies” with Korean popular culture in an attempt to promote

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their brands and products (Chosun Daily, 2012). Various studies verified the effects of Korean popular culture on promoting Korean products. For example, a few studies identified, in Japan and Hong Kong, the influence of widely popular Korean television dramas, *Winter Sonata* and *Daejanggeum*, on consumers' intentions to visit Korea and images of Korea as a desirable destination (Han et al., 2011; Su et al., 2011; Kim and Kim, 2009). Similarly, the effects of Korean popular culture on preferences for Korean products, like cosmetics and cell phones, gained verification in Japan and China (Kim et al., 2006, 2007).

While a number of studies demonstrated that consumers' information search and evaluations of foreign products are affected by a country image (Chao et al., 2005; Lin and Chen, 2006; Schnettler et al., 2008; Godey and Lai, 2011), others have investigated the influence of popular culture on a country image (Lita and Cho, 2012; Sung, 2012; Huang, 2011). People can create or change a country image through popular culture which embraces specific images, memories and emotional characteristics of the country (Huang, 2011; Lee and Bai, 2010; Ryoo, 2009; Creighton, 2009). Thanks to advancements in globalization through mass-media, popular culture serves as an international marketing tool for promotion of a country image (Lee and Bai, 2010; Su et al., 2011).

Since 2008, the Korean government has supported globalization of Korean food with eager, aiming to enhance brand equity and market share of Korean food and restaurants in the global market (Korean Food Foundation, 2012). Previous studies on Korean food have discussed its superiority in terms of nutrition and sensory characteristics, while others examined international consumers' preferences for and satisfaction with Korean food (Bai and Zhao, 2003; Kweon and Yoon, 2006; Sul et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2007; Park et al., 2012; Back, 2012; Jang et al., 2012). For expansion of Korean cuisine in the global market, marketing research of local customers' perceptions of and attitudes toward Korean restaurants is necessary. Literature shows an increase in Korean food consumption, popularity of Korean popular culture, and a positive relation of popular culture with an image of a country in the global market. However, little research has been conducted regarding the effects of Korean popular culture on consumers' perceptions of Korean restaurants through a country image of Korea in the global market.

The study pursues an investigation of the influence of Korean popular culture on Korean restaurants through the image of Korea in the global market. The findings of the study would be useful for restaurant operators in developing marketing strategies for seeking to expand to global markets, and for foreign governments in designing policies for globalization of ethnic cuisines and restaurants. This study is unique in three aspects. First, the study examines the influence of Korean popular culture on preferences for Korean restaurants through a country image of Korea. Second, while previous studies examined Korean popular culture collectively, this study identifies three major segments of Korean popular culture (Korean celebrities, Korean television dramas, and Korean popular music) based on ripple effects and examines the relative influences of each segment on the image of a country effect. Third, this study collected data in a multi-cultural setting of four international cities, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Sydney and Dubai.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Globalization of ethnic cuisines

Globalization of a domestic cuisine generates income from foreign currencies not only from the sales of food and services at restaurants overseas, but also from exporting domestic agricultural and processed products. For this reason, governments encourage indigenous restaurant companies to expand overseas and offer

supports for information of regulations for entrepreneurship and related businesses, training for chefs, financial aid for consultation and start-up loans and so on (Sunata, 2005; Korean Food Foundation, 2012).

Globalization of ethnic cuisines occurred either top-down or the reverse. The approach of top-down follows the move of managers of trans-national corporations and other international elites, while the down-top approach builds from the ground through the actions of popular organizers and migrant workers (Imai, 2010). French cuisine is the best example of the former due to upper class society's promotion of its cuisine through expatriate chefs in royal courts, imperial conquests, and the export of luxury goods, such as champagne. Conversely, globalization of Italian and Chinese cuisines follows the latter model (Pilcher, 2008). Italian or Chinese restaurants abroad were operated by its immigrants as a means of making a living for their families. Initially, their customers were other immigrants and later expanded to locals, which resulted in globalization of Italian or Chinese restaurants. Japanese restaurants also followed the down-top approach. Nobu, the world-renowned Japanese restaurant, demonstrates globalization by a specific organizer. Imai (2010) argued that Nobu's case is especially significant for three primary reasons in terms of globalization of Japanese cuisine. First, the basis of the food is Japanese cuisine with localized flavors. Arguably, since ethnic cuisines should have their origins from different regions of the world, they usually use domestic ingredients and are prepared by authentically ethnic chefs, thereby strengthening the validity of the cuisine (Heldke, 2003). However, Nobu attempted to use local ingredients to enhance local consumers' comfort (Tycoon Magazine, 1999). Second, Nobu's restaurants are in the major cities around the world, such as New York, London, Tokyo, and Los Angeles which are the centers of not only economies and politics but also diverse cultures (Taylor et al., 2014). The popularity of Japanese food is a significant example of a global impact of the food culture through a presence in recognizable cities (Imai, 2010). Third, the success of Nobu accompanied the global spread of Japanese popular culture and products, such as movies, cartoons, fashion, electrical devices (e.g., televisions, video cameras, and mini cassette players), and automobiles (Cwiartka, 2001).

International introduction of a domestic cuisine is a process involving interactions of various factors at different levels. These factors can be classified into five categories, such as culture and religious factors, socio-demographic factors, food-related personality traits, exposure and past experience, and motivational factors (Mak et al., 2012). Among the factors, culture may regulate how food is coded into 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' within a certain country (Batra, 2008). Thus, international introduction of a domestic cuisine includes cultural transformation (Cook and Crang, 2001; Sunata, 2005) (i.e., innovation of McDonald menus that appeal to the local market in India), hybridization (Cook and Crang, 2001; Sunata, 2005) (i.e., American-Japanese food which is made from the ingredients from and by people of the U.S.), and fusion (Cook and Crang, 2001; Sunata, 2005) (i.e., adaptation of serving processes and service systems to the local culture).

2.2. Korean popular culture and a country image

While most of recent research on a country image or a country of origin (COO) has been focused on only its effect on customers' purchasing behaviors toward foreign products, the literature has ignored the influences of other marketing tools on customers' behaviors in related to the concepts. A country image is a cognitive representation which a person believes to be true regarding the nation and its people, resulting from political distance, disaster, wars, education, personal experience, and mass media (Sung, 2010). Country of origin (COO) is defined as an original place where

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