



Discussion paper

Is unfamiliarity a double-edged sword for ethnic restaurants?



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ABSTRACT

Unfamiliar aspects of ethnic foods are found to enhance both perceived authenticity and perceived risk. Whereas the former positively influences customers' evaluations of foods and induces consumption behavior, the latter negatively affects customer behavior. Due to these conflicting effects, ethnic restaurateurs face a dilemma of whether to emphasize unfamiliar aspects to increase customer perception of authenticity or to eliminate them to reduce perceived risk. Thus, this study investigated (1) the effects of food information on perceived authenticity and perceived risk and (2) the comparative influences of perceived authenticity and perceived risk on customer satisfaction and purchase intention. The results revealed that unfamiliar ingredients influenced both perceived authenticity and perceived risk, whereas unfamiliar dish names only affected perceived authenticity. Additionally, the results support the notion that ethnic restaurant managers should endeavor to convey the uniqueness of their ethnic foods to maximize the effect of perceived authenticity over that of perceived risk.

1. Introduction

Incorporating ethnic dining as a regular element of individuals' diets is an increasing trend (D'Antuono and Bignami, 2012). Approximately 80% of U.S. customers eat at least one international cuisine every month (NRA, 2016). Moreover, two-thirds of consumers report that they eat a wider variety of ethnic cuisines than they did five years ago. The extant research has found that experiencing new flavors and different cultures are major reasons for dining in ethnic restaurants (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). Thus, ethnic restaurateurs utilize unfamiliar elements to satisfy customers' needs for novel experiences.

However, previous research has led to two conflicting viewpoints on the role of unfamiliarity in ethnic restaurants (Jang et al., 2012; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007; Wang and Mattila, 2015). On the one hand, some favor the use of unfamiliar stimuli because customers perceive these as authentic and appreciate them. In the literature, perceived authenticity is most commonly discussed as crucial to the success of an ethnic restaurant (Liu and Jang, 2009; Tsai and Lu, 2012; Wang and Mattila, 2015). Accordingly, Jang et al. (2012) found that customers perceive ethnic elements that are unique and distinctively different from those of non-ethnic restaurants as authentic, and these elements consequently affect customers' behavioral intentions. On the other hand, others argue that customers who experience less familiar authentic stimuli may ascribe negative subjective meanings to their experience, such as uncertainty, peculiarity, risk and fear (Ritchey et al., 2003; Tasci and Knutson, 2004). These researchers have noted

that individuals have a tendency to eat foods with which they are already familiar and to avoid trying novel foods (i.e., ethnic food). In a study of ethnic foods, Choe and Cho (2011) found that individuals' unfamiliarity with ethnic foods (in this case, African and Mongolian foods) determined their willingness to try these foods. Accordingly, previous research suggests increasing familiarity through direct or indirect food experiences to decrease these individuals' perceived risk of consuming ethnic foods (e.g., Gefen, 2000).

The above-mentioned contradictory role of unfamiliarity confuses ethnic restaurateurs, who must decide whether they should emphasize unfamiliarity to increase the perceived authenticity of their businesses or eliminate unfamiliar stimuli to reduce perceived risk. As discussed above, previous research has examined the influences of perceived authenticity and perceived risk on ethnic dining experiences. However, there is a lack of information on their comparative influence on customer behavior. Furthermore, little research has been conducted on the extent to which (un)familiar factors affect customers' evaluations. In examining the influence of familiarity on perceived risk, previous research has focused on personal experiences of ethnic foods and familiarity with the origin culture of the food (Ha and Jang, 2010; Jang and Kim, 2015). However, much less is known about the influence of external factors (e.g., food information). Previous research on food choice has suggested that information about food items (e.g., ingredients and nutrition) can play an important role in developing positive attitudes and reducing perceived risk (Fischer and Frewer, 2009; Wandel, 1997). Moreover, researchers have found that the name of a dish significantly influences customers' evaluations of that dish and consequently impacts

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food choices (e.g., Irmak et al., 2011; Swahn et al., 2012; Wansink et al., 2001). Thus, customers' familiarity with food-related information, such as dish names and ingredients, may influence customers' perceptions of the authenticity and risk of an ethnic food.

To address the neglected areas identified in the existing ethnic dining literature, this study examined the influence of unfamiliar food-related information on customers' evaluations of the food and the mechanism through which it might affect customers' purchase intentions. Specifically, the objectives of the current study were to a) investigate whether a unique dish name affects individuals' perceptions of authenticity and perceived risk, b) investigate whether unfamiliar ingredients affect individuals' perceptions of authenticity and perceived risk, and c) investigate the comparative influence of perceived authenticity and perceived risk on individuals' purchase intentions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Food-related information

In the food choice literature, researchers have consistently reported a significant influence of food labeling, which provides customers with information (e.g., ingredients and sensory descriptions), on customer behavior (e.g., Drichoutis et al., 2005; Wandel, 1997). While focusing on dish names, some of these researchers have noted that attractive and descriptive dish names significantly influence customers' food choices (Wansink et al., 2005, 2012). Wansink et al. (2005) reasoned that dish names and labels provide taste cues and therefore improve food-related expectations. Accordingly, researchers have suggested that dish names and labels are important media that create a need by effectively communicating relevant quality attributes to customers and stimulating positive emotions toward the food product (Wansink et al., 2001).

In the ethnic dining setting, previous researchers have noted that diners at ethnic restaurants are interested in new flavors and authentic experiences (e.g., Ebster and Guist, 2005; Jang et al., 2012; Wood and Muñoz, 2007). However, they also expect a certain level of familiarity (Tsai and Lu, 2012). It is known that foods that are too novel and unfamiliar often increase perceived risk among customers (Choe and Cho, 2011). In line with this discussion, the current study focused on extrinsic cues that may affect customers' perceptions of authenticity and risk (see Fig. 1).

2.2. Influence of unfamiliar food-related information on perceived authenticity

Authenticity is commonly defined in terms of uniqueness or otherness (Ha and Jang, 2010; Tasci and Knutson, 2004). In line with this definition, Jang et al. (2012) suggested that the unique and exotic aspects of ethnic restaurants are important markers of authentic dining experiences. Food authenticity will therefore be conveyed by the food's distinct or novel attributes (Chhabra et al., 2013; Heldke, 2003). Researchers have identified various factors that contribute to food authenticity, including the cooking process, place of origin, status of the cook, ingredients, and flavors (Abarca, 2004; Chiang, 1994; Cohen and

Avieli, 2004; Martin, 1984; Zibart et al., 1995). In particular, food ingredients that are locally sourced or unique are central to food authenticity (Beer, 2008; Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Groves, 2001).

Sukalakamala and Boyce (2007) supported this notion, finding that the use of authentic Thai ingredients is the most important factor contributing to an authentic Thai restaurant experience. As Liu and Mattila (2015) discussed, some ethnic restaurants adopt secret menu strategies and selectively provide menus listing dishes whose ingredients are unfamiliar to local people. However, they criticized this practice, as it does not provide opportunities for experiencing real ethnic foods and will negatively influence customers' authentic dining experiences. Based on previous findings, the use of ingredients that are unfamiliar to locals would significantly affect customers' evaluations of food authenticity. Consistent with the idea that those unique and/or unfamiliar attributes promote perceptions of authenticity, unique and unfamiliar ethnic dish names should heighten expectations for authentic food experiences. Based on the discussion above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Unfamiliar ingredients enhance customers' perceptions of authenticity.

H2. Unfamiliar dish names enhance customers' perceptions of authenticity.

2.3. Influence of unfamiliar food-related information on perceived risk

Perceived risk, as commonly defined in the literature, refers to consumer uncertainty regarding the negative consequences of purchasing a product or service (Rubio et al., 2014). Two types of risks are discussed in the marketing literature: inherent and handled risk. Inherent risk is the latent risk that a product category holds for a customer, whereas handled risk is the amount of conflict that the product category is able to arouse when the customer chooses a specific brand from a product category in his or her usual buying situation (Bettman, 1973). Researchers have defined ethnic restaurants as dining establishments that serve ethnically authentic foods from other countries and provide an opportunity to learn about different cultures by serving them in distinctive environments (Su, 2011; Turgeon and Pastinelli, 2002). Thus, ethnic restaurants involve some level of inherent risk because they serve unfamiliar foods. However, management can control customers' perceptions of risk by manipulating specific factors (e.g., flavors and ingredients) that are familiar to local customers.

The risk literature describes different types of consequences or dimensions in the overall risk construct (e.g., Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972; Dowling and Staelin, 1994). For example, previous researchers noted that a consumer faces five different kinds of risks in the process of deciding to purchase a product: financial, performance, physical, psychological, and social. However, in food research, researchers commonly frame food risk as a threat to quality or safety (Verbeke, 2005). Thus, we focused on food quality (i.e., taste and value for money) and safety when addressing perceived risk in the current study.

In the food literature, researchers have noted that familiarity contributes to developing positive attitudes and preferences, as well as to mitigating perceptions of risk (Wansink et al., 2014). However, unfamiliar stimuli that heighten uncertainty and/or the unknown likely increase both perceived risk and consequent negative consumer behavior (e.g., Cunningham, 1967; Mitchell, 1999). For example, Tuorila et al. (1994) noted that unfamiliar components embedded in ethnic foods might be perceived as strangely unfamiliar or even anxiety inducing. These adverse reactions to ethnic food may increase risk perceptions and even lead to the avoidance of unknown foods (Gyomoth and Mykletun, 2009). While customers perceive risk from various sources, food information plays a significant role in their assessments of risk (Wansink et al., 2014). Accordingly, Wansink et al. (2014) suggested the provision of ingredient information that highlights the



Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

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