



# Customer responses to food-related attributes in ethnic restaurants



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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of food-related attributes (i.e., food names and ingredients) on perceived authenticity and emotions (i.e., positive and negative), as well as the comparative influence of customers' perceived authenticity and emotions on purchase intentions. The results show that unfamiliar food names and ingredients significantly enhance customers' perceptions of authenticity and induce positive emotions. By contrast, familiar food names and ingredients arouse negative valence emotions, such as boredom and calm. We also found that perceived authenticity is the most influential factor for increasing ones' purchase intentions, followed by positive arousal (i.e., active, adventurous, affectionate, daring, and energetic), positive valence emotion (i.e., happy, joyful, loving, pleasant, and satisfied), and negative arousing emotions (i.e., disgusted, guilty, and worried). This study's findings provide ethnic restaurateurs with insights into how to better utilize their resources to deliver authentic and pleasant dining experiences to their visitors.

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic foods, which have been defined as foods that originate from an ethnic group's heritage and culture (Kwon, 2015), are becoming increasingly popular as a part of individuals' daily diets (D'Antuono and Bignami, 2012; Sloan, 2011). According to the National Restaurant Association (2016), in the U.S., 80% of customers eat at least one international cuisine per month. Moreover, two-thirds of U.S. customers reported that they eat a wider variety of ethnic cuisines than they did five years ago. Recognizing the significance of the ethnic food market, authors have published a growing number of studies on ethnic restaurants. Because ethnic restaurants are ethnically themed and create an environment and other stimuli that are associated with the culture of the cuisine served (Ebster and Guist, 2004), researchers have consistently emphasized the role of unfamiliarity in customers' perceived authenticity, which is a crucial factor of customers' evaluations of ethnic restaurants (e.g., Jang et al., 2012; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Parsa et al., 2005). For example, customers develop their perceived authenticity based on assessments of the existence of items that are unique and exotic. Accordingly, Jang et al. (2012) noted that uniqueness and difference are often referred to as 'authenticity'.

Previous researchers have advanced our understanding of authenticity cues and have guided ethnic restaurateurs toward the types of stimuli that should be provided to their customers.

However, several problems in the extant ethnic restaurant literature have been identified. First, previous studies examining customers' dining experiences were limited to the consumption and experience stage, such as the presence of ethnic service providers and customers, as well as atmospherics (e.g., Jang et al., 2012; Wang and Mattila, 2015). Thus, there is lack of information on another important stage, i.e., the pre-purchase stage. Given that customers' assessment of authentic cues begins at the pre-purchase stage (Wang and Mattila, 2015) and affects their purchase decisions, this stage is critically important. Second, previous research focusing on food-related attributes is scarce. Such neglect is surprising, given that food is one of the most important factors contributing to customers' perceived authenticity of ethnic restaurants (Kim and Jang, 2016; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007; Tsai and Lu, 2012). For example, in a recent experimental study focusing on Korean food, Kim and Jang (2016) found that the authenticity of the food (manipulated by the use of an original sauce) is the factor that most strongly influences respondents' perceptions of authenticity, followed by advertising and ethnic service providers. In addition, previous research on (un)familiar experiential cues of ethnic dining has focused mainly on customers' cognitive responses, such as perceived authenticity, perceived risk, image of local foods, and perceived value (e.g., Ha and Jang, 2010; Jang and Kim, 2015; Seo et al., 2013; Wang and Mattila, 2015). Considering that ethnic diners not only seek novel experiences (e.g., new flavors and

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different cultural experiences) but also pursue pleasant and exciting experiences at ethnic restaurants, it is important to understand customers' emotional responses to unfamiliar elements. Environmental psychology researchers have particularly emphasized the influence of emotional reactions on consumers' behavioral responses (e.g., [Mehrabian and Russell, 1974](#)). The Mehrabian-Russell model (hereafter, M-R) model suggests that environmental stimuli cause emotional reactions that, in turn, elicit individuals' approach or avoidance behavior toward the environment.

Therefore, to address these neglected areas in the current literature on ethnic restaurants, the current study examined the influence of unfamiliar food-related attributes (i.e., food names and ingredients) by applying the M-R model. This model discusses primarily emotional responses to stimuli; therefore, the current study extends Mehrabian and Russell's framework by examining customers' cognitive (i.e., perceived authenticity) and emotional responses (i.e., negative and positive emotions). Specifically, this study aimed to examine (1) whether uniquely named ethnic dishes influence individuals' perception of authenticity and affective feelings; (2) whether unfamiliar ingredients in an ethnic food impact customers' perceived authenticity and affective feelings; and (3) whether individuals' perceived authenticity or emotional responses most strongly influences purchase intentions.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. M-R model

The M-R model posits that environmental stimuli create individuals' emotional states, which, in turn, influence whether they approach or avoid the environment ([Mehrabian and Russell, 1974](#)). This model has spawned many studies on restaurant customer experiences (e.g., [Kim and Moon, 2009](#); [Liu and Jang, 2009](#); [Jang et al., 2011](#)). When applying this model, previous researchers utilized various servicescape factors as stimuli, customers' emotional and/or cognitive responses to the stimuli as organisms, and behavioral intentions (e.g., revisit and positive word-of-mouth publicity) as behavioral responses. They found that restaurants' servicescape factors, such as ambience, layout, interior design, seating comfort, and human elements, positively affect customers' emotional state (e.g., pleasure and arousal), which positively impacts repeat purchase ([Jang and Namkung, 2009](#); [Kim and Moon, 2009](#); [Liu and Jang, 2009](#)). As previously discussed, the M-R model has been developed and used mainly in environment studies; however, individuals react not only to environmental stimuli but also to other kinds of information (e.g., advertising). Thus, to examine the effect of food-related cues on customer responses and consumption behavior, we used the M-R model as the theoretical foundation of this study. However, we extended the original model in two ways. First, we adopted a unipolar approach to assess individuals' emotional responses. The original model offers a bipolar framework for emotional responses (e.g., pleasantness-unpleasantness) based on the assumption that positive and negative emotions are inversely related. However, several researchers argue that positive and negative emotions are relatively independent ([Larsen et al., 2001](#); [Tellegen et al., 1999](#); [Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000](#)). In line with this notion, previous researchers have utilized a discrete positive and negative emotion scheme instead of a pleasure and arousal scheme and tested the relationship between two types of emotions and behavioral intentions (e.g., [Jang and Naumkung, 2009](#); [Liu and Jang, 2009](#); [Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000](#)), indicating that customers' positive emotions are more likely to produce adopt approach behavior; conversely, negative emotions are more likely to produce avoidance behavior. Second, we extended the M-R model by also examining individuals' cognitive responses.

The original model focused only on emotional responses. However, several researchers argue that both emotional and cognitive responses are caused by the exposure to specific stimuli and lead to behavioral reactions ([Kim and Moon, 2009](#); [Wakefield and Blodgett, 1999](#)). [Kim and Moon \(2009\)](#) supported this notion, finding that servicescape factors influence both perceived service quality and emotional states, which mediate the servicescape's effect on revisit intention. In summary, the current study utilized food-related cues (i.e., food names and ingredients) as stimuli, the emotional and cognitive states (i.e., perceived authenticity) elicited by the stimuli as organisms and customers' intention to purchase the ethnic dish as an actionable response (see [Fig. 1](#)). The following sections discuss the components of stimuli, organisms, and behavioral tendency in an ethnic dining setting.

### 2.2. Food names

Previous research on food choice has reported that a food's name significantly affects customers' evaluations of the food and consequently impacts consumption behavior (e.g., [Irmak et al., 2011](#); [Swahn et al., 2012](#); [Wansink et al., 2001](#)). For instance, attractive and sensory-descriptive names increase customers' frequency of choosing the food by effectively communicating relevant quality attributes and eliciting positive emotions ([Swahn et al., 2012](#); [Wansink et al., 2005](#)). [Wansink et al. \(2001\)](#) supported this notion, finding that favorably descriptive and evocative food names on restaurant menus increased sales of those items by 27% and increased customers' repurchase intention. Several researchers ([Irmak et al., 2011](#); [Tuorila et al., 1998](#); [Wansink et al., 2005](#)) provided the plausible explanation that food names raise (e.g., a healthy name) individuals' expectations about the food (e.g., healthfulness and nutritional value). Thus, researchers noted that a food name intervention is effective, persistent, scalable and cost-effective ([Dimara and Skuras, 2005](#); [Wansink et al., 2012](#)). Although several researchers have examined the influence of food names on food evaluations and consumption in a restaurant context (e.g., cafeteria, [Wansink et al., 2001, 2005, 2012](#)), few studies have explored the effect of food names in the ethnic restaurant setting. In some ethnic cuisines, uniquely named dishes express historical and/or fictive events. For example, the name of a Chinese cuisine called Beggar's chicken originates from a legend. During the Qing dynasty, homeless beggars stole a chicken from a rural farm. The farmer suspected the crime and chased the beggars to a riverbank. To hide the chicken, the beggars buried it in mud. Later that night, the beggars returned to the river, lit a fire and set the mud-soaked chicken directly on the flame. Then, a tight crust formed over the chicken. When cracked open, the feathers fell right off to reveal aromatic, tender meat. The Emperor, who happened to be passing by, stopped to dine with the beggars and declared the chicken so delicious that it was added to the Imperial Court menu. The beggars, rather than keeping their newfound dish a secret, decide to sell Beggar's chicken to local villagers; as a result, they overcame poverty ([Beggar's Chicken, 2016](#)). Uniquely named cuisines (e.g., Beggar's chicken) that are unfamiliar to local customers influence their evaluations of the food and consequently induce consumption behavior.

### 2.3. Food ingredients

Because ethnic food represents the characteristics of a particular region or cultural tradition, researchers have commonly considered it a cultural symbol ([Edles, 2004](#)). Accordingly, 'othering' ethnic foods – that is, highlighting their differences from local foods – has been identified as a key component of these foods' authenticity ([Chhabra et al., 2013](#); [Heldke, 2003](#)). In ethnic restaurants, customers are more concerned about food authenticity than about

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