



Effects of ingredients, names and stories about food origins on perceived authenticity and purchase intentions



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the influence of unfamiliar food-related attributes (i.e., ingredients and food names) and stories about food origins on consumers' perceptions of authenticity and their purchase intentions. The results show that unfamiliar ingredients, unique food names, and stories about food origins increase consumers' perceptions of authenticity. In ethnic restaurants, authenticity has been emphasized as a critical factor for ensuring customer satisfaction and purchase intentions. The mediating role of customers' perceptions of authenticity is confirmed in the current study. The findings of the current study suggest that the management of Chinese restaurants should develop unique food names and stories about a dish's origin, as these are pivotal elements contributing to customers' perceptions of authenticity and purchase intention.

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1. Introduction

In the ethnic food literature, two contradicting factors, i.e., authenticity and familiarity, have been discussed as determinants of customers' behavioral intentions (Liu and Jang, 2009; Tasci and Knutson, 2004; Tsai and Lu, 2012; Wang and Mattila, 2015). For example, on the one hand, some researchers have emphasized perceived authenticity as a crucial factor in customers' evaluations of ethnic restaurants (Jang et al., 2012; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Parsa et al., 2005). On the other hand, others argue that customers who experience unfamiliar 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). However, the statistics for the ethnic food market show that the latter issue is less important for ethnic restaurateurs. The number of ethnic restaurants – especially Chinese restaurants – in the market has been on the rise. Estimates show that 90% of Americans have tried Chinese food and that 63% of them eat Chinese food every month (George, 2000). Recent results of a survey on American consumers' ethnic food purchases show that one third of the participants purchase Chinese food on a regular basis (Statistica, 2015),

and this is greater than the combined purchases of all other Asian foods (i.e., Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese). Thus, Chinese restaurants have been quite successful at achieving high customer familiarity with their cuisine and culture, which is important for reducing customers' reluctance to try novel ethnic foods.

However, because of customers' high familiarity with Chinese cuisine and intense market competition, Chinese restaurateurs are focusing more on producing food that tastes good and on providing good value for the price rather than on offering authentic experiences (Liu and Jang, 2009). Such management practices go against the current trend (i.e., the experience economy). Kim and Jang (2016) noted that perceived authenticity is a particularly important attribute of ethnic restaurants that appeals to customers. Thus, Liu and Jang (2009) have warned Chinese restaurants that relying on good-tasting food or low prices alone cannot guarantee success in this fiercely competitive marketplace. In support of this warning, Parsa et al. (2005) discovered that a lack of authenticity is one reason why some hospitality and tourism businesses are ultimately unsuccessful. Therefore, the following important question is posed: What are the authenticators in ethnic restaurant settings?

Although their work is not directly related to ethnic restaurants, Littrell et al. (1993) provided useful insights for understanding the concept of authenticity in ethnic business contexts. They suggested that consumer demand for authenticity is driven by a search for products that provide an element of uniqueness and newness and that are not readily available in other places. These insights are con-

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sistent with previous research finding that customers regard ethnic elements that are unique and noticeably different from those of non-ethnic restaurants as being authentic (Jang et al., 2012). Thus, managers of ethnic restaurants are interested in designing cultural space and time to create an illusion of consuming “otherness” (Mkono, 2013; Wang and Matilla, 2013). However, to effectively enhance customers’ perceptions of authenticity, managers of ethnic restaurants should acknowledge those factors of the ethnic food production stages—including preparation, presentation, and consumption—that are critical in delivering authentic experiences. For example, in an effort to maintain the authenticity of the sushi provided by overseas Japanese restaurants, the Japanese government and organizations developed a recommended program with a wide range of suggestions encompassing ingredient selection, fish processing, and symbolic decorations (Yang, 2013). Moreover, Lin and Mao (2015) noted that perceptions of authenticity for food souvenirs can be enhanced by traditional food processing, packaging, storytelling and reminiscences.

However, previous research on ethnic dining has focused mainly on the consumption stage (i.e., service employees, other customers, and atmosphere) when discussing customers’ perceptions of authenticity (e.g., Ebster and Guist, 2005; George, 2000; Jang et al., 2012; Wang and Matilla, 2015; Wood and Munoz, 2007). As a result, much less is known about the factors that influence perceptions of authenticity during the other two stages, i.e., preparation and presentation. To fill the gap in the authenticity research, the current study thoroughly examines the determinants of authenticity. More specifically, the current study examines (1) whether the unfamiliar ingredients of ethnic foods influence individuals’ perceptions of authentic experiences; (2) whether unique food names and stories about food origins influence individuals’ perceptions of authenticity; and (3) whether individuals’ perceptions of authenticity as derived from the examined factors affect purchase intentions. The results of the current study are expected to contribute to the previous literature by examining factors of the preparation and presentation stages that have not been discussed in the ethnic food literature. In doing so, this study provides empirical evidence suggesting that perceptions of authenticity are particularly important for ethnic restaurant diners. In addition to making this theoretical contribution, we believe that ethnic restaurant operators can benefit from considering these factors by providing customers with authentic experiences and ultimately enhancing their purchase intentions.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. Perceived authenticity of ethnic restaurants

Different approaches to understanding authenticity have been documented in the literature (i.e., objectivist, constructivist, and postmodernist, Lu et al., 2015). First, the objectivist approach judges authenticity based on genuineness and originality (Appadurai, 1986; Wang, 1999). Accordingly, “inauthentic objects yield inauthentic experience, and no copy could ever be authentic” (Rickly-Boyd, 2012, p. 87). However, several researchers have criticized this conception of authenticity, arguing that authenticity cannot be objectively determined (Belhassen et al., 2008). Accordingly, in contrast to the objectivist approach, constructivists suggest that authenticity is not pure or objective; instead, it is symbolic, negotiable, and dependent on the context (Cohen, 1988; Squire, 1994). Thus, objects are not perceived as authentic because they are original but rather because they are constructed as such in terms of individuals’ interpretations, beliefs, or perspectives (Jang et al., 2011). Finally, the postmodernist approach posits that an object’s authenticity is meaningless because individuals do not regard origi-

nality or reality as important concerns (i.e., existential authenticity, Wang, 1999). Accordingly, Cohen (1995) noted that postmodern tourists emphasize the enjoyment of the experience rather than the authenticity of the original source of the experience. This perspective is grounded in a long philosophical tradition concerned with a state of being or what it means to be oneself (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006). For example, Pearce and Moscardo (1986) suggested that authenticity can stem from experiences with people and places, in accordance with Heidegger’s concepts of self-actualization and *Dasein*—an entity that genuinely exemplifies its being. In extending Heidegger’s perspective to the tourism experience, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) noted that it is “another human activity that creates, in its own way, opportunities to explore and experience what it means to be human” (p. 302).

Ethnic restaurants in a foreign country usually target nationals of the country where they are located rather than immigrants from the country or culture that they represent (Jang et al., 2012). These customers want to experience subjective authenticity, which is based on images that are formed through previous experiences or knowledge of the culture from an outsider’s perspective (Jang et al., 2012; Lego et al., 2002). Therefore, in line with a constructed concept of authenticity, we believe that the staged, prepared, and packaged framing of the culture of an ethnic restaurant can still constitute an authentic experience (e.g., Cohen, 1988). Accordingly, understanding the cues that signal authenticity to consumers is important. Jang et al. (2012) suggested that unique and unfamiliar aspects that reflect cultural elements that are appealing to customers will enhance an establishment’s perceived authenticity. In line with this idea, the following sections discuss the attributes of different stages of food consumption through which managers can provide authentic experiences in ethnic restaurants (see Fig. 1).

2.2. Preparation stage

The preparation stage of ethnic food production involves ingredient selection and cooking methods. Researchers discussed the role of ingredients as important authenticators that distinguish pure from pseudo ethnic foods (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011). Accordingly, the current study focuses on the influence of ingredients on perceived authenticity.

2.2.1. Ingredients

Food from a specific region is an expression of that place. It is produced using local ingredients and is prepared according to the local people’s specific skills (Mason and Brown, 1999). Therefore, the ethnic “othering” of foods, emphasizing the attributes of these foods that are distinct or novel from those of local foods, has been identified as one of key indicators of food authenticity (Chhabra et al., 2013; Heldke, 2003). Chinese food is distinguished by the use of certain cooking methods (e.g., stir-frying) and multiple ingredients (Zibart et al., 1995; Chiang, 1994). Moreover, other unique features of Chinese cuisine are special cutting, seasoning, and marinating methods for particular ingredients prior to cooking (Martin, 1984). Notably, among the various features that characterize ethnic food, “authentic ingredients” influence individuals’ perceptions of authenticity the most (Sakamoto and Allen, 2011). For example, in a study examining customers’ dining experiences in Thai restaurants, Sukalakamala and Boyce (2007) found that the use of authentic Thai ingredients is the most important factor contributing to an authentic Thai restaurant experience.

Although most ingredients used in Chinese food are familiar to Westerners, many ingredients are still uniquely Chinese and can be obtained only in Chinese grocery stores (George, 2000). Considering customers’ negative feelings about unfamiliar foods and their tendency to try to avoid them, some ethnic restaurants employ a dual-menu strategy—preparing one menu to cater to

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