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Short Communication

Distal and proximal predictors of food personality: An exploratory study on food neophilia



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A B S T R A C T

'Food-related personality traits', or simply 'food personality', is emerging as a new stream of research that investigates individual differences in terms of food preferences. There have already been some attempts within the literature to conceptualize the multidimensional construct of food personality, and some outcomes of food personality have also been studied. However, we have limited knowledge of the psychological antecedents of food personality. In this short communication, using survey data from 1006 Turkish consumers, we conduct an exploratory study of the distal and proximal predictors (i.e. psychological traits and other individual differences stemming from traits) of one dimension of food personality, namely food neophilia. Our findings suggest that promotion focus and materialism are proximal predictors of food neophilia, and openness to experience, extraversion, need for cognition and need for touch are distal predictors that have indirect effects on food neophilia through promotion focus and materialism.

1. Introduction

Food preferences have always been a topic of interest for scholars examining individual differences (e.g., Lumley, Stevenson, Oaten, Mahmut, & Yeomans, 2016; Walker, Christopher, Wieth, & Buchanan, 2015). In recent years, there have been some efforts to consolidate research in this area. For instance, the concept of 'food-related personality traits' – or briefly 'food personality' – is emerging as a new multi-dimensional construct that seeks to explain individual differences among consumers regarding their food preferences (Kim, Suh, & Eves, 2010). We currently have a basic understanding of food personality and its outcomes. At this emerging stage, food personality consists of food neophilia, food neophobia and food indulgence dimensions, and is known to affect behavioral outcomes such as satisfaction (Jang & Kim, 2015; Ji, Wong, Eves, & Scarles, 2016; Kim et al., 2010). Defined as the attraction towards new food items, food neophilia is the active variety-seeking component of food personality and is a key component for understanding individuals' food-related tendencies (Jang & Kim, 2015; Ji et al., 2016). Currently, our understanding of its psychological origins is limited.

In this short communication, using survey data from 1006 Turkish respondents, we provide preliminary insights into the distal and proximal psychological antecedents (i.e. psychological traits and other individual differences stemming from traits) of food neophilia. The one

contribution has at least two benefits for this emerging literature. First, an understanding of the psychological origins of food personality dimensions (e.g., food neophilia) is necessary to further clarify what food personality is (e.g., its definition), how it should be conceptualized (e.g., how many dimensions it should eventually consist of) and what its boundaries are (e.g., how stable it is over one's lifetime). In other words, to understand how the stream of literature on food personality could be developed, it is beneficial to examine the psychological antecedents of food personality. Second, an understanding of the psychological antecedents – especially distal predictors (traits) – is also important from a methodological perspective, as they also constitute the control variables which will be needed in future empirical research to eliminate alternative explanations (e.g., potential issues of endogeneity – Antonakis, Day, & Schyns, 2012).

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Distal and proximal predictors of food neophilia

Antonakis et al. (2012) differentiate between distal and proximal predictors of behavioral outcomes. 'Distal predictors' or 'traits' are stable psychological or physiological variables. They are conceptually distant from the outcome variable, and have various indirect effects through proximal predictors. 'Proximal predictors' are such variables as

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attitudes, values and orientations. They have closer conceptual links to the behavioral outcome than distal predictors, and they stem, to some extent, from distal predictors. That is, proximal predictors partially or fully mediate the effects of distal predictors on the outcome variable.

2.1.1. Proximal predictors

One can engage in novelty either because of intrinsic motivation (e.g., curiosity, the excitement of exploring, doing something different and meaningful) or extrinsic motivation (e.g., making above-average gains, surpassing one's peers, increasing one's status). In line with this, regarding proximal predictors, we chose one variable associated with intrinsic motivation to neophilia (promotion focus) and another associated with extrinsic motivation (materialism).

Promotion focus is a trait-like psychological orientation associated with pleasure-seeking and a focus on positive outcomes (Higgins, 1997; Tuncdogan, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2015). It is known to be an antecedent of risk-taking and preference for novelty, and has effects on eating behaviors (ibid.). Promotion focus increases the internal motivation to seek pleasure and increases the perceived value and worth of pleasure-seeking behaviors, such as engaging in new experiences. More specifically, individuals with high levels of promotion focus experience 'regulatory fit' when engaging in tasks associated with advancement, exploration and novelty (Vaughn, Baumann, & Klemann, 2008). This feeling of fit causes the individual to perceive the task as inherently meaningful. Hence, promotion-focused individuals are found to engage more in new and innovative behaviors (ibid.). For these reasons, we expect promotion focus to be positively related to food neophilia.

Materialism is about worldly experiences and "happiness-seeking through consumption" (Chiagouris & Mitchell, 1997), so we expect materialists to be more interested in the prospect of discovering a new worldly pleasure. Moreover, food neophilia can serve the status-seeking needs of a materialistic individual. The experience of having tried a new and exotic food can be thought of a souvenir, especially if the individual has a photograph which captures that moment (e.g., Belk, 1985). By engaging in a relatively exclusive experience that few others have shared, materialists can form a memory they can use to demonstrate or increase their (actual or perceived) social status. Hence, we expect materialism to be positively related to the attraction to new foods.

Hypothesis 1. (a) Promotion focus and (b) materialism are positively related to food neophilia.

2.1.2. Distal predictors (traits)

While there are numerous psychological traits in the literature, prior research specifically highlights two classes of traits for explaining behavioral outcomes: personality-related and intelligence-related (e.g., Van Iddekinge, Ferris, & Heffner, 2009).

Of personality traits, we selected two (openness to experience and extraversion) that are shown to have strong positive relationships to promotion focus (Tuncdogan et al., 2015) and to be conceptually linked with neophilia. Thus, we expect openness to experience and extraversion to have indirect effects on food neophilia through promotion focus. Extraversion may also have a positive association with materialism, as it increases status-seeking, which is an aspect of materialism (Belk, 1985). Extraverts are more likely to compare themselves with others (Gilbert & Allan, 1994), and this may also increase their desire for material possessions.

We selected need for cognition as an intelligence-related variable, recognizing also its relationship with neophilia. Need for cognition is known to increase curiosity, which is associated with promotion focus (van Vianen, Klehe, Koen, & Dries, 2012) and neophilia. Thus, we hypothesize that need for cognition is likely to have a positive effect on food neophilia through promotion focus. Furthermore, prior research demonstrates a negative relationship between need for cognition and dark-triad personality traits (e.g., Machiavellianism), which are strongly related to materialism (Lee et al., 2013). In other words, we

expect that while need for cognition may indirectly increase food neophilia through its positive effect on promotion focus, it may also decrease food neophilia through its negative effect on materialism.

Finally, we also selected another trait, need for touch (preference for haptic/kinesthetic, as opposed to only visual or verbal, information acquisition – Peck & Childers, 2003), because food neophilia is a distinct kind of neophilia, involving touch (via hand and/or mouth) and an indulgence with the physical world. For the latter reason, need for touch also has a conceptual link to materialism. Indeed, prior studies demonstrate strong positive associations between need for touch and materialism (e.g., Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014). We expect this positive relationship between need for touch and materialism to result in a positive indirect effect on food neophilia.

Hypothesis 2. Through their effects on proximal variables of promotion focus and/or materialism, the distal variables (a) openness to experience, (b) extraversion, (c) need for cognition and (d) need for touch have indirect effects on food neophilia.

3. Methodology

Research assistants were recruited to collect survey data from 1006 Turkish consumers both on the streets and around a university in Balıkesir. No compensation was offered for participation. List-wise deletion of incomplete responses left us with 918 usable responses. In the questionnaire, we used four-item scales based on prior research, to measure promotion focus (Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010), need for cognition (Wood & Swait, 2002), need for touch (Peck & Childers, 2003), materialism (Moschis & Churchill Jr, 1978). Food neophilia was measured by the items "At dinner parties, I will try new foods", "I like foods from different cultures", "I am constantly sampling new and different foods" and "I like to try new ethnic restaurants" based on prior research (Jang & Kim, 2015; Kim et al., 2010). Likewise, TIPI sub-scales (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) were used to measure openness to experience and extraversion. Age, gender, education, income and employment status were included as control variables. Back-translation was used to ensure proper translation.

We conducted several checks to ensure the reliability and validity of the scales. Reliability-wise, the scales had sufficient α scores (food neophilia = 0.79; materialism = 0.70; promotion focus = 0.79; need for cognition = 0.73; need for touch = 0.93).¹ In terms of validity, we first conducted PCA with Varimax rotation.² Each scale emerged as a distinct construct, each item loading at least 0.6 on its corresponding dimension and < 0.4 on others. We then tested a confirmatory factor analysis model with five factors, which showed a very good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 470.79$; d.f. = 160; RMSEA = 0.05; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.94; SRMR = 0.05), and a better fit than models with fewer variables (Table 1).

4. Results

The correlations among the constructs corresponded quite closely to those observed in prior research and to our predictions, suggesting that the dataset is typical. Most importantly, there was a positive and significant correlation between food neophilia and most antecedent variables (all except need for cognition).

We tested the multiple mediation models using the bootstrapping procedure explained by Hayes (2013), a contemporary technique that has become increasingly popular (e.g., Kelly & Dupasquier, 2016). In line with our expectations, the bootstrapped regression analyses

¹ Following prior research, TIPI dimensions (Gosling et al., 2003) were excluded from reliability/CFA/EFA analyses, as "TIPI was designed using criteria that almost guarantee it will perform poorly in terms of alpha and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) or Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) indices" (See Gosling, 2018)

² PCA results and the correlation matrix are included in the supplementary material.

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