International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Systems
Volume 8 Issue 2 December 2015
ISSN: 0947-6250 Print

Hospitality & Tourism Systems

Relationships of Involvement, Ethnic Food Consumption, and Food Shows: An Initial Exploration

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Abstract *Sales of ethnic foods continue to increase. Among the many factors leading to an increase in ethnic food consumption include more interest in television cooking shows where consumers gain knowledge about a product through media; resulting in heightened interest. Employing a revised Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) to measure involvement, this study aims to shed more light on the consumption of ethnic foods and the effects of media on that consumption. Thought this exploration the findings reveal a surprising suggestion, that ethnic food consumption is not governed by consumer's involvement with the products.*

Keywords: *Ethnic, Food, Media, Conumer, Inventory*

INTRODUCTION

Sales of ethnic foods make up more than 12 percent, estimated at $3 billion, of all retail foods sold in the United States (US) and are growing steadily at an annual rate of 5 percent (ATS, 2008; Meszaros, 2012). Interest in ethnic foods has increased in both restaurants and grocery stores. Although many ethnic cuisines had joined the restaurant industry's mainstream for decades (National Restaurant Association [NRA], 2000); more diverse cuisines and ethnic food items have increasingly inspired and been incorporated into the menus of restaurants in general. The popularity of ethnic foods is reflected also in mainstream supermarkets and grocery stores. General consumers now have access to specialty ethnic ingredients to prepare meals at home or they can simply purchase ready-prepared ethnic fares from these grocers (Harper, 2011). Whether in restaurants or grocery stores, the availability of ethnic foods helps to satisfy the demand of today's consumers and yield profits for restaurant and food retail businesses.

Among the many factors leading to an increase in ethnic food consumption includemore interest in television cooking shows (Bates, 2011). Consumers gain knowledge about a product through media; resulting in heightened interest, change of beliefs and attitude, and motivation to engage in product related behaviors. Similar results may be expected from the television food-related shows or programs featuring and educating viewers about ethnic foods. Greater exposure to diverse cultures and cuisines can influence consumers to eat or make ethnic foods (FSRmagazine.com, 2012; Meszaros, 2011).

The lucrative ethnic food market and growing popularity of ethnic foods among mainstream consumers warrant further investigation. Like otherconsumer products, market segmentation has been employed to develop consumer profiles of ethnic foods, based on significant demographic and socio-economic variables (e.g., Roseman, 2006). However, psychographic characteristics can provide insight that adds to the effectiveness of market segmentation strategies. This study thus proposes an investigation of ethnic food consumption usingconsumer behavior construct of involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1994). Potential relationships of ethnic food involvement and consumption behaviors as well asviewership of television food-related shows or programs wereevaluated.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Considering the diversity in the US society, foods indigenous to other nations or belonging to certain cultures and/or sub-cultures otherthan the mainstream US are assumed to be of the "*other*" (i.e., *ethnic*). Therefore, foods stemming from the other customs and traditionsare subsumed here as *ethnic foods*(Mellgren, 2003).

Ethnic Food Market

The market for ethnic restaurants has long been developed. The NRA consumer survey back in 1994 indicated Italian, Mexican, and Chinese (Cantonese) cuisines had joined the restaurant industry's mainstream since 1990's (NRA, 2000). Now more than ever, the $476 billion restaurant industry has seen growth of ethnic foods on restaurant menu offerings. Trostler and Gvion (2007) studied the trends in restaurant menus from 1950 to 2000 and found that from 1980s onward, American restaurants have offered a large number of ethnic dishes; from authentic, to modified, to invented ethnic dishes on their menus. Restaurants are looking into new exotic additions, especially for appetizer and starter dishes. Such items as lettuce wrap and hummus are gaining ground on the American menus. Main entrées, though more conservative, include dishes influenced by more familiar cuisines like Mexican, Italian, and Asian (Leahy, 2007). At the same time, South American influence becomes apparent as Brazilian steakhouses are gaining popularity throughout the US (ATS, 2008). Success and growth of ethnic foods in the US has been noted as relating to the consumers' desires to experiment with a broader range of unfamiliar flavors (Researchandmarkets.com, 2009b) by seeking out novel foods (Roseman, 2006). The association of ethnic flavor profiles with novel and striking flavors corresponds to these desires of the consumers (Researchandmarkets.com, 2009b).

Even the traditional offers now may receive some novel twists in flavors – the strategy that is considered a safe risk for food producers (Researchandmarkets.com, 2009b). Fusion cuisine is an example where restaurants cater to the consumers' changing palates by combining exotic flavors into the recipes that are more familiar to the American consumers (ATS, 2008). The term "*fusion*" in food industry refers to the extraction of a flavor profile, an ingredient, or a cooking idea from one cuisine and transferring it into another food product (Dahm, 2002). By "Americanizing" the dishes, it possibly helps to reduce consumer's suspicion and fear of ethnic foods and ingredients and to encourage them to experience new tastes (Trostler & Gvion, 2007).

The foodservice sector (i.e., restaurants) accounts for 65 percent of all ethnic food sales (marketresearch.com, 2006). Foodservice outlets are the main venues where American consumers choose to try ethnic foods rather than preparation at home. Moreover, restaurants are responsible for new product innovations and trends. The popularity of new ethnic food products in the foodservice sector contributes to the success of the similar product categories in the retail grocery segment (ATS, 2008) where supermarkets and grocery stores capture the remaining 35 percent of ethnic food sales (marketresearch.com, 2006).

Rising interest and popularity of ethnic foods in restaurant setting permeate supermarkets and grocery stores based on the idea that foods eaten at restaurants influence foods eaten at home (Sloan, 2001a). The demand for restaurant-quality ethnic foods, such as Chinese cuisine, contributes to the presence of convenient and value-driven products in the grocery stores. A consumer research revealed the trend for frozen foods is on the rise as 75% of the consumers rated convenience as their number one concern, followed by cost and taste. Among the various cuisines, Chinese frozen-food products are expected to outperform the others even traditional American frozen food categories. The same study found one of every two consumers surveyed expressed the desire for more Chinese cuisine in their grocer's frozen food section (Reuters.com, 2008). The demand for higher-quality convenience foods is noted also to contribute to the growth of ethnic food market (Menumagazine, 2007). Mainstream consumers' lack of experience in cooking ethnic cuisines emphasizes the prevalence of ready-made and easy-to-prepare ethnic meals in the retail grocery market. If preparation of ethnic meals was considered, consumers would generally turn to high-quality meal kits and ready-made sauce (ATS, 2008).

Purchases of ethnic foods account for $1 out of every $7 US consumers spent on groceries. Most grocery retailers have enhanced the breadth and depth of their ethnic food product lines. More shelf space and aisle sections are dedicated to international products for the mainstream consumers. The ethnic variety of food products includes kosher, halal, Central and South American, Mexican, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, and Thai (ATS, 2008). In an attempt to further capitalize on the rising demand for ethnic foods; major grocers go as far as developing an entirely new brand as a specific ethnic-specialty store. Examples include United Supermarkets's Super Mercado and Amigo banners and H-E-B Grocery Co.'s Mi Tienda. Even the biggest player in the grocery retail segment, Wal-mart, is considering developing a similar concept store (ATS, 2008). The Hispanic food products offered at these stores not only target Hispanic shoppers but make the products even more accessible for mainstream consumers.

Reasons for Rising Consumption of Ethnic Foods

Many reasons have been given as to why ethnic food is the fastest growing category in the US food and beverage product sector. Naturally, food expenditures of the growing ethnic population contribute to growth in ethnic food sales (NRA, 2005b). More than 300 counties in the USare considered "majority-minority" areas where the majority of residents belong to minority ethnic groups (ATS, 2008). During the next 20 years, the annual growth of Latino population is estimated at 1.2 million, Blacks and Asians at 400,000 each, while non-Latino Whites at 500,000 (AGMRC, 2009). Ethnic consumers may drive the ethnic food market but the majority supporting ethnic food sales in the USareCaucasian Americans(ATS, 2008).

The growing ethnic population, in fact, contributesto a strong transmission of ethnic tastes into the mainstream (Researchandmarkets.com, 2009a). The impactethnic population has on white Americans may be explained through the process of acculturation. It is the process where interpersonal contact between two culturally distinct groups of individuals leads to subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups. In this case, members of the host society can change their cultural patterns including food consumption as influenced by the ethnic population with whom they have encountered (Jamal, 1996). Unique ethnic cultures influence the nature of the American culinary repertoire and its modification (Trostler & Gvion, 2007). Similar results of the acculturation process have been noted even when the cultural contact is an indirect one. Exposure to other cultures through either media or experiences of others canignite changes in the cultural pattern including food choices (Jamal, 1996). For instance, Verbeke and Lopez (2005) found that mainstream Belgian consumers' selection of non-local food items was partially influenced by mass media. In the US, it has been reported also that television food shows can provide ideas for the grocery store customers to buy ethnic food items being featured. To capitalize on sales opportunities, grocers identify what ethnic food items are specifically mentioned and used; then ensure that these items are available for customers who would likely seek them out after viewing the shows (Mellgren, 2003).

Bi-directional influences of food shows/programs and interest in ethnic foods may be expected. On the one hand, watching these shows/programs allows consumers to be exposed to other cultures and ethnic foods. Knowledge gained can heighten awareness and interest in this food product category. The acculturation process may be triggered. Individuals become involved and engage in consumption behaviors. On the other hand, consumers already involved with or interested in ethnic foods watch food shows and related programs as the behavioral outcomes of such involvement. Consumption of media relating to or featuring the product that serves as the focal object of importance allows already involved individuals to gain more knowledge about the product. Such activities thus further strengthen the individual's level of involvement (Bloch, Commuri, & Arnold, 2009), leading to more consumption. For consumer behavior researchers, this study may reveal possible associations between consumption of mediaand ethnic foods. The coincidental growing popularity of television food shows/programs could be another reason for rising consumption of ethnic foods.

Using Involvement - Market Segmentation for Ethnic Foods

Canadian exporters of ethnic foods stated that the US is home to three distinct types of ethnic food consumers: a) first-generation ethnic consumers, b) second-generation ethnic consumers, and c) mainstream shoppers. Of these segments, the mainstream shoppers comprise the majority, 75 percent, of ethnic food consumers. Targeting each group of consumers requires different strategies based on the understanding of the targeted population (ATS, 2008).

Demographic and socio-economic variables have long been used to create profile of mainstream consumers of ethnic foods (e.g., Roseman, 2006). However, psychological attributes can provide further insight into this consumer segment. Therefore, we propose using involvement to enhance the effectiveness of market segmentation.

For decades, researchers have studied the concept of involvement in the areas of both social psychology and consumer behavior (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004). Over the years, researchers have scrutinized the involvement concept from its conceptualization, to operationalization, to measurement. Researchers have segmented views concerning aspects of involvement (e.g., Houston & Rothschild, 1978; Bloch & Richins, 1983; Cohen, 1983; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Celsi & Olson, 1988; Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990; Poiesz & De Bont, 1995) and have led to extensive body of knowledge in several contexts and directions. Still, lack of agreement on various aspects of involvement persists (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2008). Rather than proposing yet another perspective, this study focuses on relevant propositions, arguments, and empirical evidence from past research that are helpful in examining consumer's involvement with ethnic foods as a product category.

Of different definitions of involvement, the common view and underlying theme emerged which is the focus on personal relevance. Consumer involvement is generally referred to as the level of perceived personal importance, interest, or relevance evolved by a stimulus or stimuli or situation-specific goals (Verbeke & Vackier, 2004). The stimuli can be products, services, product categories, brands, purchase decision or advertisements (Mittal, 1995; Verbeke & Vackier, 2004).

When the product itself is the focal object of importance, the resulting involvement is mostly regarded as enduring involvement. This type of involvement refers to ongoing interest in a product class and differs across individuals (Bloch, Commuri, & Arnold, 2009). Involvement with product as a general case, rather than confined by any specific situation, is determined by consumer's past experience with the product as well as personal beliefs, values, and needs (Bloch & Richins, 1983). The product itself and the inherently acquired satisfaction from its usage create perception of product importance for the consumers.

Behavioral responses to enduring product involvement include product information search independent of purchase, consumption of media relating to the product (e.g., special-interest magazines), maintaining sensitivity and cognitive vigilance to product information encountered. These responses are ongoing similar to the perceived importance and involvement that are enduring (Bloch and Richins, 1983).

Researchers have related the concept of involvementto the studies of consumer behaviors with different product classes in various contexts, including foods. For instance, Flynn & Goldsmith (1993) found highly involved consumers with travel (representing service) take more vacation trip as well as watch more travel-related television programs than the low-involved. Similarly, highly involved consumers with fashionable clothing (representing goods) watch television programs relating to clothing styles more than the low-involved group. Also, shopping frequency and monthly spending are positively related to involvement. With regard to food, Juhl and Poulsen (2000) noted the explanatory power of level of involvement on consumer's shopping enjoyment and frequency of usage for fish. Differences between high and low involved groups were found significant in fish consumption and related behaviors. These researchers also suggested that compared to product involvement, demographic characteristics were found to be poorer predictors of consumption and consumption related behaviors. Thus, using product involvement as a segmentation tool can be more effective than relying on demographics alone.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

Zaichkowsky (1985) developed a universal scale called Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) to measure involvement with any object. She gave a general definition for involvement as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (p. 342) which addresses well the sources of enduring involvement (Bloch & Richins, 1983). Marshall and Bell (2004) compared PII with other scales measuring perceptions toward food (i.e., Food Involvement Scale [FIS], Variety Seeking Scale [VARSEEK], Food Neophobia Scale [FNS]). PII significantly and positively correlated with FIS and VARSEEK and negatively with FNS. Correlations with other food scales, especially with FIS, provide legitimacy for using PII in examining consumer perceptions toward ethnic foods as specific product category.

This study employed the revised version of PII scale (Zaichkowsky, 1994) in measuring consumer's involvement with ethnic foods. The revised 10-item PII required participants to rate ethnic food on 10 adjective pairs (i.e., important/unimportant, interesting/boring, relevant/irrelevant, exciting/unexciting, means a lot to me/means nothing, appealing/unappealing, fascinating/mundane, valuable/worthless, involving/uninvolving, and needed/not needed) anchoring 7-point semantic differential scales, with the leading statement "*To me ethnic food is:*".Measures for ethnic food consumption and media consumption (i.e., viewership of television food-related shows or programs) included the frequency, extent of consumption, as well as variety.

Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected from using a self-administered online survey from a convenience sample of general consumers. Invitations emails were sent out to potential consumers and a snowballing technique was used to maximize response rate. Participants were encouraged to forward the invitation email to other individuals in their contact list who may be interested in participating in the survey.

Data Analysis

Pearson's *r* correlations were employed to evaluate relationships between consumer's involvement with ethnic foods and consumption behaviors. These behaviors included a) frequency of choosing ethnic food establishments for meals outside of home, b) purchases of ethnic foods at grocery stores or supermarkets, c) preparations of ethnic or ethnic-inspired meals at home, and d) viewing of television food-relatedshows or programs. T-test analyses were used to evaluate any differences in the consumption behaviors stated between low- and high-involvement groups. Further, t-test analysis was conducted, post-hoc, to assess television food show/program viewers' and non-viewers' involvement with ethnic foods.

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

A total of 115 respondents completed the survey but only 104 caseswere usable. Those excluded from the analysis were due to large number of missing responses. Respondents' demographic profiles include 59.80% female and 40.20% male with 51.96% singles and 41.18% married, having an average age of 35. Of these, 66.67% were White/Non-Hispanic, 14.71% Hispanic, 12.75% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.94% African-American, and 2.94% Others. The majority, 69.61%, resided in urban cities with population of 50,000 or more and 69.61% also have earned at least a Bachelor's degree with median income of $60,000. These are similar demographic findings for other food related surveys, especially wine consumers (Taylor & Barber, 2014).

Ethnic Food Consumption Behaviors

On average per week, our sample reported having meals outside the home 4.22 times and spending $80.11 for these meals. Of these, 2.40 times (56.87%) and $48.45 (60.48%) werespent eating at ethnic food restaurants and/or other ethnic food establishments (such as cafes, food trucks, food courts, street vendors). Table 1 shows ethnic cuisines chosen by consumers for meals outside the home.

Table 1. Ethnic Cuisines Chosen by Consumers for Meals Outside the Home

Cuisine	N = 104	%
Mexican	98	94.23
Chinese	82	78.85
Italian	75	72.12
Thai	59	56.73
Japanese	51	49.04
Mediterranean	44	42.31
Indian	39	37.50
Vietnamese	39	37.50
Spanish	30	28.85
French	26	25.00
Middle Eastern	23	22.12
German	19	18.27
South American	16	15.38
Others (e.g., Cajun, Korean, Polish, Filipino)	12	11.54

The top three ethnic cuisines chosen by consumers for meals outside the home (i.e., Mexican, Chinese, and Italian) emphasize past report that these cuisines maintain popularity in the restaurant industry's mainstream. Though, interestingly more exotic cuisines such as Thai are gaining more acceptance and becoming more desirable for the consumers.

On average, the consumers sampled reported that they shopped for food at a supermarket or a grocery store 1.78 times a week and spent $118.24. Of the times in a week they shopped for food at a supermarket or a grocery store, 1.49(83.71%) of them did their purchases include some type of ethnic food such as ethnic food ingredients (vegetables, spices, sauces, rice, noodles, etc.), frozen ethnic-food products, ethnic food meal kits, or ready-to-eat ethnic food. These purchases of ethnic foods amounted to $40.07 or 33.89% of the total weekly spending at supermarket or grocery store. Past report indicated $1 out of every $7 (or 14%) consumers spent on ethnic foods for their groceries. Our finding reveals significant increase over the years.

Further, the consumers sampled reported cooking at home 5.75 times a week on average and 3.07 (53.39%) of these were for preparing meals that they considered ethnic or ethnic-inspired. Table 2 shows the cuisines chosen by the respondents when they prepared ethnic or ethnic-inspired meals at home.

Table 2. Ethnic Cuisines Chosen by Consumers when Prepared Meals at Home

Cuisine	N = 104	%
Mexican	85	81.73
Italian	59	56.73
Chinese	45	43.27
French	26	25.00
Mediterranean	25	24.04
Indian	21	20.19
Thai	16	15.38
Japanese	14	13.46
Spanish	13	12.50
German	12	11.54
Middle Eastern	10	9.62
Vietnamese	6	5.77
South American	5	4.81
Others (e.g., Cajun, Creole African, Finnish)	9	8.65

The top three ethnic cuisines consumers chose to prepare meals at home mirror the familiarity they have with these cuisines for meals outside the home. The more exotic cuisines; such as Indian, Thai, Japanese, Middle Eastern, or Vietnamese are less likely for consumers to opt for home-cooking themselves.

Media Consumption Behaviors

On average, our sample reported watching television 2.52 hours a day which included 0.55 hour spent watching food-related shows or programs. Though, 50.5% did not report viewership at all of this type of shows or programs.

Ethnic Food Involvement and Consumption Behaviors

For each respondent, an average score was calculated from responses to the 10-item PII scale. The sampled consumers reported overall average M = 5.99, SD = 1.01 indicating high-level of involvement with ethnic foods. Only 4 out of 104 cases reported average involvement score of less than 4, on a 7-point scale. It must be acknowledged that this may be an effect of the survey, in that highly involved consumers are possibly more likely to respond to the survey.

Using correlations, relationships between ethnic food involvement and consumption behaviors were evaluated. A significant and positive relationship was only found between consumer's involvement with ethnic food and the frequency of choosing ethnic food establishments for meals outside the home (r = .22, p = .03). Other consumption behaviors of interest did not have significant relationship with involvement.This is a unique and interesting finding. It contradicts our expected results that these behaviors would positively correlate with involvement, as has been found in other studies of product involvement. Similarly, t-test analysis suggested that between low-involvement and high-involvement groups (using median of 6.1 as the cut-off point), the high-involvement group chose more frequently ethnic food establishment for meals outside the home (M = 2.85, SD = 1.99) than the low-involvement group did (M = 1.94, SD = 1.52)), $t(102) = 2.61$, $p < .05$. No differences were found in other consumption behaviors.

Regarding ethnic food involvement and media consumption behavior, no significant relationship was found, based on correlation. However, the resulting high number of non-viewers of television food-related shows/programs warranted a post hoc analysis. Respondents were distinguished into two groups, i.e., viewers and non-viewers. T-test was employed to evaluate any difference in ethnic food involvement between the two. It was found that viewers of food-related shows or programs had significantly higher involvement with ethnic food (M = 6.24; SD = 0.80) than the non-viewers (M = 5.77; SD = 1.12), $t(102) = 2.42$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Today's consumers are becoming more and more interested in exotic cuisines, especially when it comes to choosing meals outside the home. Consumers are also spending more on ethnic foods for groceries purchases. These findings highlight the trends in both foodservice and retail settings. The lack of knowledge or skills may explain why consumers are likely to prepare more familiar ethnic foods such as Mexican, Italian, or Chinese at home. However, as familiarity and consumption experiences with the more exotic cuisines grow, consumers may also feel more comfortable preparing meals based on those cuisines at home. Foods retailers can contribute to and capitalize on this expected trend by expanding the offers of easy-to-prepare meal kits equipped with simple instructions for traditional Thai, Indian, or Vietnamese dishes, for instance.

The fact that we did not find correlation between media consumption (i.e., television food-related shows or programs) and ethnic food involvement may emphasize greater influence of the acculturation process that is engaged through other means such as direct interpersonal contacts. Though, viewers of television food-related shows or programs are significantly more involved with ethnic foods. These consumers' interest in foods in general could have led them to engage in media consumption. Also, for them, so called "foodies", ethnic foods hold much personal relevance and provide satisfying experiences with foods.

Overall findings suggest that ethnic food consumption is not governed by consumer's involvement with the products. Consumers in general occasionally choose ethnic foods for meals outside the homes. However, the more involved with ethnic foods they are, the more they make these selections. The way ethnic restaurants market thus may need to be re-assessed. The classic 20/80 marketing rule suggests that it is the few that contributes the most. In this regard, the small group of customers who are highly involved with ethnic foods can be and should be turned into highly loyal customers that contributes to the majority of sales revenues of ethnic foodservice establishments.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Of course, this study is limited in its generalizability and understanding of involvement. Perhaps lower involved consumers are not as interested in food, or exploring new foods, as a higher involved consumer would be. Still, that is what makes these findings so important and interesting- it provides a new understanding that suggests that we need to learn more about what motivates consumers to choose new food choices.

This is only a beginning to a better understanding, and has the limitation of a small sample that is not necessarily generalizable to larger population. That said, it is a start and it provides a new piece of the puzzle to be explored more deeply.

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