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Will It Taste Better If You Think About What You Are Eating? Cultural Differences in Food-Ingredient Information Seeking

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This research examines the cultural differences in ingredient information seeking when consumers evaluate foods. Through four studies, we show that compared to Chinese, Americans have a greater need for ingredient information and process this information more separately, thus evaluating foods more favorably when the ingredients are displayed separated (vs. mixed).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When consumers choose foods, some may prefer items for which they are offered specific information about the ingredients constituting the items they will be eating, whereas others may not form preferences based on such information. Thus, an important question regarding food marketing arises: Should food be marketed by providing specific information about ingredients to consumers?

The answer to this question may depend on the consumer's cultural background. In this research, we propose that Chinese versus American consumers may have different lay beliefs about how different foods come together to form a meal, affecting norms for preparing and serving foods. Due to Confucian teaching and traditions, Chinese people tend to believe in the philosophy of yin and yang, such that apparently opposite forces are complementary and need to be balanced. This belief permeates the norms and values associated with foods and eating. When preparing foods, Chinese people want to balance yin foods (e.g., fruits and vegetables) and yang foods (e.g., beef and pork). Chinese food is an art of mixture that balances color, flavor, and texture. Chinese cooking involves looking at the combination of the ingredients as well as paying particular attention to the complex process and equipment involved. China has hundreds of cooking methods. Good cooking depends on the blending of various ingredients and condiments rather than the taste of the individual elements. Chinese people believe that various ingredients result in the overall harmony of flavors (Sundararajan 2015). For example, when preparing a dish of "Beef with mushroom and bamboo shoots," Chinese people put all ingredients into a pan and deep-fry them repeatedly, to mix the flavors of all the ingredients. In the pursuit of balance and moderation, Chinese people do not perceive each ingredient to be a stand-alone, independent element of the meal, but rather consider the dish that has been formed to be a new, different entity—separate from its component parts. The Judeo-Christian traditions of Americans, on the other hand, eschew balance in favor of extreme stances (Briley, Morris, and Simonson, 2000; Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2009). Consistent with this belief, Americans tend to regard each ingredient as independent, and focus on how each element can contribute (Sundararajan, 2015).

Based on these considerations, we propose that Americans emphasize individual ingredients more than the Chinese do and therefore tend to be more interested in detailed descriptions of each ingredient when they consider foods. Study 1 provided initial evidence for our prediction. We asked participants to imagine going to a restaurant for a dinner and finding the restaurant has two versions of the menu available: one has the names of dishes with pictures, whereas the other has the names of dishes with detailed information about ingredients. American participants (60.7%) were more likely than Chinese participants (31.7%) to choose the menu with ingredient information, ($\chi^2(1) = 17.28, p < .001$).

Study 2 used a 2 (culture: American vs. Chinese) \times 2 (food type: soup vs. pizza) \times 2 (ingredient information: present vs. absent) between-subjects design. We told participants we were interested in their choice of foods. Then they were either exposed to a pair of soup dishes or a pair of pizzas, depending on the condition. In addition, we manipulated the availability of ingredient information. In one condition, both food options had no ingredient information. In the other condition, however, both options provided ingredient information. American participants reported greater choice certainty when ingredient information was present for food options than when it was absent ($M = 5.57$ vs. $4.37, F(1, 193)$

$= 18.30, p < .001$). However, this difference was mitigated for Chinese participants ($M = 5.27$ vs. $4.95, F(1, 193) = 1.31, p > .25$). The two-way interaction between culture and ingredient information was also significant ($F(1, 193) = 4.81, p = .03$), which was independent of food type ($F < 1.0$).

Study 3 used a 2 (culture: Chinese vs. American) \times 2 (processing style: overall impression vs. ingredients focus) between-subjects design. Participants saw a picture of seafood pasta and were either asked to form an overall impression of food or write down each ingredient in this dish. We then asked them to indicate the tastiness of the food. The two-way interaction between culture and processing style was significant ($F(1, 140) = 6.10, p = .015$). In particular, Americans evaluated pasta more favorably if they wrote down each ingredient than if they gave an overall impression ($M = .65$ vs. $-.04, F(1, 140) = 3.40, p = .07$). However, the reverse was true for Chinese people, though the difference was marginally significant ($M = .87$ vs. $1.45, F(1, 140) = 2.71, p = .10$).

Study 4 used a 2 (culture: Chinese vs. American) \times 2 (food presentation: separate vs. mixed) between-subjects design with the type of food as a within-subject factor. Participants saw a picture of a beef noodle dish and a beef burger, and the order of these pictures was counterbalanced. In the separate condition, each ingredient was displayed separately in both pictures. In the mixed condition, ingredients were presented mixed together in both pictures. A 2 \times 2 ANOVA of culture and display on food evaluation revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 151) = 9.63, p < .01$), which was independent of food type. More specifically, separated (vs. mixed) presentation increased food evaluations for Americans ($M_{\text{separate}} = 1.09, M_{\text{mixed}} = .49, F(1, 151) = 4.90, p = .03$) but decreased food evaluations for Chinese participants ($M_{\text{separate}} = .14, M_{\text{mixed}} = .70, F(1, 151) = 4.73, p = .03$).

In sum, our research contributes to literature examining consumers' food perceptions, an area of increasing importance in consumer behavior research (Bagchi and Block, 2011; Bublitz, Peracchio, and Block, 2010; Wansink, 2015). Further, we address the influence of culture, showing that Chinese consumers may be less interested than American consumers in information about individual food ingredients.

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