International Journal of Hospitality Management 89 (2020) 102596

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Hospitality Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhm

Research Paper

A creative-mix or variety-mix fusion experience? Examining marketing strategies for ethnic fusion restaurants

Stephanie Q. Liu[a,*], Laurie Luorong Wu[b], Chen-Ya Wang[c]

[a] Department of Human Sciences, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA
[b] School of Sport, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Temple University, PA, USA
[c] Institute of Service Science, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu, Taiwan

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Ethnic dining
Fusion
Restaurant marketing
Consumer behavior
Experimental design

ABSTRACT

According to the National Restaurant Association, ethnic fusion cuisine is identified as a top food trend for the next decade. To that end, it is important for hospitality researchers and practitioners to understand consumer behavior in this fast-growing sector and derive appropriate marketing strategies for fusion restaurant brands. The present research examines the joint effects of fusion type (creative-mix vs. variety-mix), restaurant price tier (high vs. low), and cuisine compatibility (high vs. low) on consumers' judgments and decision-making processes. The results show that ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier will generate higher levels of perceived chef expertise and visit intention through the creative-mix strategy, regardless of cuisine compatibility. However, ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier will generate higher levels of perceived chef expertise and visit intention through the variety-mix strategy only when cuisine compatibility is high. Implications for marketing ethnic fusion restaurants are discussed.

"Try some of the wildest combinations of flavors at these Chicago restaurants:
VERMILION // 10 W HUBBARD: Latin-Indian fusion
PARACHUTE CHICAGO // 3500 N ELSTON AVENUE: Korean-New American fusion
FAT RICE // 2957 W DIVERSEY: Chinese-Portuguese fusion
BELLYSHACK // 1912 N WESTERN: Korean-Puerto Rican fusion"
—Chef Olé

—Chef Olé

1. Introduction

From "Spring Miso-Strone Soup" at the Orsa & Winston Italian-Japanese fusion restaurant in Los Angeles to "The Boricua" at the Belly Shack Korean-Puerto Rican fusion restaurant in Chicago, the culinary blending of unique cultures and exotic flavors is more popular than ever in today's restaurant industry—sky is the limit in ethnic dining (Greenwald, 2015; Passy, 2019; Wharton, 2014). Ethnic fusion restaurants practice the art and science of organically mixing various cuisine styles into an exciting and appealing set of menu offerings (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014). According to the National Restaurant Association's (2018) "What's HOT Culinary Forecast" report, ethnic fusion cuisine is identified as a top food trend for the next decade. To that end, it is important for hospitality researchers and practitioners to understand consumer behavior in this fast-growing sector and derive appropriate marketing strategies for fusion restaurant brands.

Drawing on the culture-mixing phenomenon (Cheon, 2019; Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016), the current research examines the effectiveness of two commonly used fusion types in ethnic dining—creative-mix and variety-mix—and aims to understand how such strategies affect consumers' perceived chef expertise and the downstream effect on restaurant visit intention. Specifically, a creative-mix fusion type reflects the idea of "culture fusion" where different cultures are fused together to create a new independent entity. For example, ethnic fusion restaurants utilizing the creative-mix strategy would offer original dishes that are designed to creatively blend ingredients and flavors from more than one cultures (e.g., Kung Pao Chicken Taco). In contrast, a variety-mix fusion type embraces the notion of "culture co-presentation" where different cultures remain as separate entities and are mingled together without being pressed into one. For example, ethnic fusion restaurants adopting the variety-mix strategy would offer menus with a good selection of traditional dishes from more than one cultures, reflecting a passion for classics representing each ethnic cuisine (e.g., menu consists of a Chinese section and a Mexican section).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: liu.6225@osu.edu (S.Q. Liu), laurie.wu@temple.edu (L.L. Wu), cywang@iss.nthu.edu.tw (C.-Y. Wang).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102596
Received 16 October 2019; Received in revised form 30 April 2020; Accepted 17 June 2020

In the current research, we propose that there is a congruency effect between fusion type (creative-mix vs. variety-mix) and restaurant price tier (high vs. low) in the context of ethnic fusion restaurants. Price is a critical cue that drives consumers' pre-purchase quality assessments and product decisions, especially when the marketing offering is intangible—for instance, experiential services (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Hence it is not surprising that consumers may hold different impressions and expectations for restaurants in the higher- vs. lower-price tier (Hwang and Ok, 2013; Parsa and Njite, 2004; Ryu and Han, 2010). Specifically, we argue that the creative-mix fusion type might be more congruent with a higher-price tier positioning, given that culinary creativity is a fundamental principle in the evaluation of high-end dining experiences (Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017). Conversely, the variety-mix fusion type should match better with a lower-price tier positioning, because menu variety meets consumers' need for high utilitarian value in evaluating restaurants the lower-price tier (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2010, 2008).

However, such a congruency effect is bounded by a crucial situational factor—cuisine compatibility, defined as the degree to which consumers perceive a cuisine style is compatible with another in terms of culinary characteristics and identity (Stano, 2014; Spence, 2018). For example, the culinary tradition of Japanese cuisine might be perceived as more compatible with Chinese cuisine, as compared with Mexican cuisine. In the current research, we speculate that the competitive advantage of a creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy will hold for restaurants in the higher-price tier regardless of cuisine compatibility, whereas the variety-mix (vs. creative-mix) strategy is more effective for restaurants in the lower-price tier only when cuisine compatibility is high. Furthermore, we seek to shed light into the psychological mechanism underlying the joint effects of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility on restaurant visit intention by empirically testing the mediating role of perceived chef expertise.

This research makes several contributions to the hospitality marketing literature. First, it extends research on ethnic dining by investigating the effectiveness of creative-mix and variety-mix strategies and aligning such strategic orientations with the "culture fusion" and "culture co-presentation" culture mixing phenomenon, thus bridging the hospitality literature and sociology literature (Cheon, 2019; Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016). Second, it adds to research on restaurant branding and marketing by revealing the match between fusion types and restaurant price tiers and by introducing the notion of cuisine compatibility to the ethnic dining literature (Choi et al., 2018; Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Jang et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2017; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Youn and Kim, 2017). Finally, it contributes to research on expertise judgments in the service sector (Melton and Hartline, 2010; Wu et al., 2015), and provides empirical evidence to support that perceived chef expertise is a key driver for consumers' restaurant visit intention in ethnic dining. Findings of this research have important practical implications by providing guidance to managers of ethnic restaurants regarding why, when, and how to effectively market fusion cuisine concepts.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ethnic fusion restaurants: creative-mix vs. variety-mix

With the explosive growth of the ethnic dining sector in today's global hospitality industry, scholarly research on the topic is also booming (Choi et al., 2018; Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Jang et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2017; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Youn and Kim, 2017). Previous work has demonstrated key motivational drivers of ethnic dining including authenticity, variety, novelty, uniqueness and social belongingness (Ebster and Guist, 2004; Roseman, 2006; Tsai and Lu, 2012). In addition, it has been shown that consumers' overall satisfaction and consequential revisit intention toward ethnic restaurants are oftentimes shaped by food and service quality, servicescape cues, employee behavior as well as social interactions with other customers (Jang et al., 2012; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Wang and Mattila, 2015).

A closer look into this literature, however, brings light to the observation that majority of existing work tends to treat the ethnic dining sector as a homogeneous whole, blurring the differences across business models and positioning strategies. In particular, ethnic restaurants may adopt various positioning strategies and one specific type that has been getting growing industry highlight is ethnic fusion restaurants (Trading, 2018; Wharton, 2014). Despite the industry's enthusiasm in ethnic fusion cuisines, scholarly discussion on this topic is nearly muted in the hospitality management literature, pressing an urgent need for empirical research to gain an in-depth understanding of ethnic fusion restaurants and their marketing strategies.

The present research draws on the literature on culture mixing and specifically the notion of "culture fusion" and "culture co-presentation" (De keersmaecker et al., 2016). While "culture fusion" refers to the phenomenon of blending different cultures and/or their presentations into creating a new independent entity, "culture co-presentation" reflects the coexistence of different cultures and/or their presentations (Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016). Prior work shows that attitude towards culture mixing phenomenon may vary by individual traits. For example, individuals holding polyculturalism ideology and low levels of need for cognitive closure are more likely to favor culture fusion (Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016).

Bridging such literature with the context of ethnic dining, we posit that the two culture mixing phenomena may manifest themselves into two different types of fusion strategies (i.e., creative-mix vs. variety mix), with each of them imbued with different experiential values. Reflecting the notion of "culture fusion", the *creative-mix strategy* embraces an inventive cuisine approach that creates novel dishes by blending exotic flavors and culinary skills across different cultures, meeting consumers' novelty-seeking motives by providing creative dining experiences that distinguish from any other (Yeh and Huan, 2017). In contrast, the *variety-mix strategy* is consistent with the idea of "culture co-presentation" and mingles representative courses from different cultures into one single menu, allowing consumers to experience multiple cuisine styles at a time and fulfilling their variety-seeking needs (Ha and Jang, 2013). While both types of fusion strategies are commonly employed in ethic fusion restaurants, we argue that their effectiveness is contingent on two crucial factors: restaurant price tier (high vs. low) and compatibility between cuisine styles (high vs. low), which are elaborated in the next sections.

2.2. The congruency between a restaurant's fusion type and price tier

Price is a key extrinsic cue on which consumers rely to make quality judgments and consumption decisions (Lewis and Shoemaker, 1997; Olson, 1977; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Using price as a surrogate of quality indication is particularly likely to happen in consumer evaluations where the marketing offering is intangible—for instance, the services industry (Parsa and Njite, 2004; Zeithaml, 1988). Different price levels are associated with diverse value propositions, which are developed to capture target markets that hold distinct value definitions and consumption motivations (Oh, 2003; Ye et al., 2014). Appropriate market mix integration of product and price will result in desirable customer evaluations and consumption interests as well as a positive impact on business bottom line. Inappropriate product-price integration, however, may undermine consumer evaluations towards the business (Hwang and Ok, 2013; Ryu and Han, 2010).

Consumers hold distinct expectations for dining experiences at restaurants in the higher- versus lower-price tier. Specifically, previous research suggests that creativity-centric practices are commonly observed among restaurants in the higher-price tier such as fine dining restaurants (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2013; Leschziner, 2015; Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017). In fact, as showcased by the Michelin Guide, culinary creativity is a fundamental principle in the

evaluation of high-end dining experiences (Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017). Indeed, culinary innovations (e.g., new cooking methods and menu items), which are typically led by high-end restaurants, can quickly permeate to lower-end restaurant businesses (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007). As such, for restaurants in the higher-price tier and those targeting the high-end customer segments who value originality and novelty, on-going efforts in menu innovation are crucial to ensure customer satisfaction, cultivate loyalty, and sustain competitive advantage in the market place (Ottenbacher and Harrington, 2007).

On the other hand, variety-related concerns tend to be more salient in customer evaluations of restaurant businesses in the lower-price tier such as quick service restaurants and casual dining restaurants (Ryu et al., 2010). Prior work shows that, in the lower-price tier sector, consumers' strong variety-seeking motivation is manifested in their preference for restaurants whose menu offerings are of a higher (vs. lower) level of variety (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008, 2010). As a focal component of restaurant food quality, menu variety meets consumers' need for high utilitarian value and is a core driver for consumer satisfaction and behavioral intention toward restaurants in the lower-price tier (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008, 2010). Indeed, given their strong variety-seeking motivations, consumers are more likely to exhibit restaurant switching behaviors in this price tier (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b).

Building on this stream of research, we argue that the two types of fusion strategies, creative-mix vs. variety-mix, may naturally have a better fit with restaurants positioned at different price tiers. As the creative-mix strategy is more congruent with the core principles of haute cuisine, it may be more effective than the variety-mix strategy in boosting visit intention toward restaurants in the higher-price tier (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2013; Leschziner, 2015; Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017). In contrast, the variety-mix strategy aligns better with restaurants in the lower-price tier, where consumers are motivated to seek high utilitarian value and variety (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008, 2010). Therefore, the variety-mix (vs. creative-mix) strategy may lead to higher levels of restaurant visit intention when implemented by ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier.

2.3. The important role of cuisine compatibility

We further posit that the congruency effect of fusion type and restaurant price tier can be complicated by cuisine compatibility. Containing distinct flavors and ingredients, cuisines with different ethnic heritage may carry high or low levels of compatibility when paired with each other (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014). For example, consumers are likely to perceive the Japanese cooking style and culinary features as more compatible with Chinese cuisine rather than Mexican cuisine. As such, a Japanese-Chinese fusion restaurant, in comparison with a Japanese-Mexican fusion restaurant, connotes a higher value in cuisine compatibility. When imagining two incompatible cuisine styles being fused into one dining concept, consumers may perceive it as challenging for the restaurant to deliver the fused culinary offerings across the two cuisine styles (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014; Thompson and Ince, 2013). Consequently, consumers may form their restaurant evaluations based on whether they believe the ethnic fusion restaurant can effectively deliver the culinary offerings as a function of the restaurant's price tier (high vs. low) and fusion type (creative-mix vs. variety-mix).

The consideration of cuisine compatibility is particularly relevant to restaurants in the lower-price tier. Our previous theorization suggests that the variety-mix strategy is more suitable for restaurants with a lower-price positioning (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008, 2010). However, such an advantage of the variety-mix strategy should be attenuated when the restaurant fuses two relatively incompatible cuisine styles. This is because the perceptions of cuisine incompatibility may dampen consumer confidence in the restaurant's capability in delivering such contrasting cuisine offerings (Spence, 2018). Prior research shows that fusion concepts that are developed based on incompatible cuisine styles are likely to be perceived as less appealing, given that consumers can be confused by dishes from two incompatible cuisines appearing on the same restaurant menu (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014). Moreover, the cost associated with hiring talents who can master distinct, authentic cuisine styles are at conflict with the limited operating budget of lower-price tier restaurants (Spence, 2018; Zeithaml, 1988). As such, we expect that ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier will benefit from a variety-mix strategy over a creative-mix strategy only when cuisine compatibility is high, but not when cuisine compatibility is low.

At the same time, cuisine compatibility may not override the creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) advantage for fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier. While the perceptions of cuisine incompatibility may dampen consumer confidence in the lower price-tier restaurants (Spence, 2018), the effect may not apply to fusion restaurants with a high price positioning. Higher price-tier restaurants are assumed for their high quality and chef competence. Furthermore, high-end restaurants are strongly associated with the customer expectations for culinary creativity (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2013; Leschziner, 2015; Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017). Therefore, unlike what applies to the lower price-tier restaurants, the idea of higher price-tier restaurants fusing two incompatible ethnic cuisines may be more exciting as opposed to confusing. Thus, the competitive advantage of a creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy will hold for ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, regardless of cuisine compatibility being high or low.

2.4. Perceived chef expertise as the underlying mechanism

Expertise, which can be defined as an organizations' ability of to deliver their promises (Baek et al., 2010), is a focal component underlying the construct of brand credibility (Erdem and Swait, 2004; Erdem et al., 2002, 2006). Such an approach of conceptualization can also be applied to the evaluation of service personnel expertise—the perception and evaluation of whether a service employee can deliver service promises (Jamal and Anastasiadou, 2009; Melton and Hartline, 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2016). Accordingly, the current research defines perceived chef expertise as consumer perceptions of the chef's ability to deliver the restaurant's culinary promises. In the restaurant context, chef expertise, particularly expertise in the domain of technical competency (i.e., culinary knowledge and skillset), is a key factor driving customer decisions to visit a restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Liu et al., 2019; Zopiatis, 2010).

We propose that fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility will jointly determine consumer perceptions of chef expertise, which will further influence their restaurant visit intention. For ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, adopting the creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy will enhance perceived chef expertise. Prior research shows that there is a close association between culinary creativity and chef expertise perceptions (Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yang et al., 2016; Zopiatis, 2010). The heightened perception of chef expertise will further contribute to consumers' interest to visit the fine-dining creative (vs. variety) fusion restaurant. This effect should hold regardless of cuisine compatibility being high or low, as the higher level of price tag will be able to endorse the restaurant of chef competence and food quality. Therefore, we propose that, for ethnic restaurants in the higher-price tier, regardless of cuisine compatibility being high or low, the creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy will enhance perceived chef expertise, which further leads to higher levels of restaurant visit intention. Chef expertise plays a lesser role, however, for restaurants in the lower-price tier.

Accordingly, we propose that when cuisine compatibility is high, there is an interaction effect between fusion type and restaurant price

tier on perceived chef expertise and visit intention. Specifically:

H1. When cuisine compatibility is high, ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier will generate higher levels of (a) perceived chef expertise and (b) visit intention through the creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy.

H2. When cuisine compatibility is high, ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier will generate higher levels of (a) perceived chef expertise and (b) visit intention through the variety-mix (v. creative-mix) strategy.

In addition, we propose that when cuisine compatibility is low, there is an interaction effect between fusion type and restaurant price tier on perceived chef expertise and visit intention. Specifically:

H3. When cuisine compatibility is low, ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier will generate higher levels of (a) perceived chef expertise and (b) visit intention through the creative-mix (vs. variety-mix) strategy.

H4. When cuisine compatibility is low, ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier will generate similar levels of (a) perceived chef expertise and (b) visit intention regardless of fusion strategy types.

Finally, we propose that a moderated mediation effect through perceived chef expertise can explain how fusion type influences visit intention for restaurants in the higher-price tier. Specifically:

H5. When cuisine compatibility is high, perceived chef expertise will mediate the impact of fusion type on visit intention in the higher price condition.

H6. When cuisine compatibility is low, perceived chef expertise will mediate the impact of fusion type on visit intention in the higher price condition.

A conceptual framework is provided in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design and sample

The study utilized a 2 (fusion type: creative-mix vs. variety-mix) × 2 (restaurant price tier: high vs. low) × 2 (cuisine compatibility: high vs. low) between-subjects experimental design. A total of 315 U.S. adult consumers, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk consumer panel (Buhrmester et al., 2011; Paolacci et al., 2010), were randomly assigned to one of the eight experimental conditions. The majority of respondents identified themselves as Caucasian (66.3%), followed by African American (16.5%), Hispanic (7.9%), Asian (6.3%), American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.6%), and other (2.2%).[1] The sample was between the ages of 19 and 90 (M = 38.1), 46.0 percent of the respondents were male, 61.9 percent earned a four-year college degree, and 65.1 percent had an annual household income of $40,000 or above.

3.2. Procedures and materials

Participants were asked to imagine themselves in a hypothetical scenario where they were considering an ethnic fusion restaurant called Zenco, a fictitious name (see sample scenario in the Appendix). Cuisine compatibility was manipulated by stating the restaurant featured "Japanese-Chinese fusion cuisine" in the high compatibility condition and by stating the restaurant featured "Japanese-Mexican fusion cuisine" in the low compatibility condition. The selection of these cuisine styles was based on popular ethnic fusion restaurants and trends (Burum et al., 2017; Cuevas, 2018; De La Cruz, 2019; Kang, 2017) as well as pre-test results. In a pre-test with 108 participants, we explained that an ethnic fusion restaurant typically would combine cuisines from at least two cultures and that some cuisines might blend together more naturally than others. We then asked all participants to rate in general (1) how they perceive "Japanese-Mexican fusion cuisine" (1 = low compatibility, 7 = high compatibility) and (2) how they perceive "Japanese-Chinese fusion cuisine" (1 = low compatibility, 7 = high compatibility). Results from a paired sample *t*-test conformed that "Japanese-Chinese fusion cuisine" (M = 5.73) was perceived as a more compatible fusion cuisine type than "Japanese-Mexican fusion cuisine" (M = 3.64; $t = 8.17$, $p < .05$). These two questions, which assess the cuisine compatibility manipulation, were also included in the main study.

Restaurant price tier was manipulated by tagging the restaurant with "$$ (Price Range: $11–30)" in the lower price condition and by tagging with "$$$$ (Price Range: Above $60)" in the higher price condition, consistent with standard restaurant price tiers on TripAdvisor. Fusion type was manipulated by emphasizing the restaurant offered "an original invention blending ingredients and flavors from both Japan and [China/Mexico], inspired by the chef's passion for creativity" in the creative-mix condition and by highlighting the restaurant offered "a variety of long-established dishes from the culinary tradition of either Japan or [China/Mexico], reflected by chef's passion for classics" in the variety-mix condition.

To measure visit intention, we asked participants "What is the likelihood that you are going to visit Zenco restaurant?" and asked them to rate on 7-point scales (unlikely/likely, improbable/probable, impossible/possible; $\alpha = .94$) adapted from Yi (1993). This scale has been widely used in hospitality research to measure consumer responses to advertising stimuli in both online as well as offline settings (e.g., Hu, 2012; Huang et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2009; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Mattila, 2002). Perceived chef expertise was captured through 7-point scales (not an expert/expert, inexperienced/experienced, unknowledgeable/knowledgeable, unqualified/qualified, unskilled/skilled; $\alpha = .94$) adapted from Ohanian (1990). Product category involvement is defined as "a person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (p. 342)—a crucial construct influencing consumer purchase decisions (Zaichkowsky, 1985). We gauged participants' product category involvement with ethnic restaurants on 7-point scales (unimportant/important to me, do not matter/matter to me, mean nothing/mean a lot to me; $\alpha = .94$) adapted from Zaichkowsky (1985). We also asked participants to indicate their liking of Japanese food (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), liking of Mexican/Chinese food[2] (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), and frequency of dining out ("On average, how many times do you dine out per week?"). Following prior research on consumer decision-making in the restaurant setting (e.g., Lu and Chi, 2018; Seiter and Weger, 2020; Wu et al., 2015), we included product category involvement, liking of food, and frequency of dining out as control variables in the statistical data analyses.

To check the manipulation of restaurant price tier, we asked participants to recall Zenco's price range (1 = $$ price range: $11–30, 7 = $$$$ price range: above $60). To check the manipulation of fusion type, we asked what kind of ethnic dishes were featured in Zenco (1 = an original invention of dishes, 7 = a variety of long-established dishes). In addition, we asked participants how realistic the scenario was (1 = unrealistic, 7 = realistic). Furthermore, we included the two questions (used in the pre-test) to re-confirm the effectiveness of the cuisine compatibility manipulation. Finally, we assessed perceived fusion

[1] Including ethnicity as a control variable in the statistical analyses yielded similar patterns of results.

[2] We asked those in the "Japanese-Chinese fusion restaurant" condition to indicate their liking of Chinese food, whereas we asked those in the "Japanese-Mexican fusion restaurant" condition to indicate their liking of Mexican food.

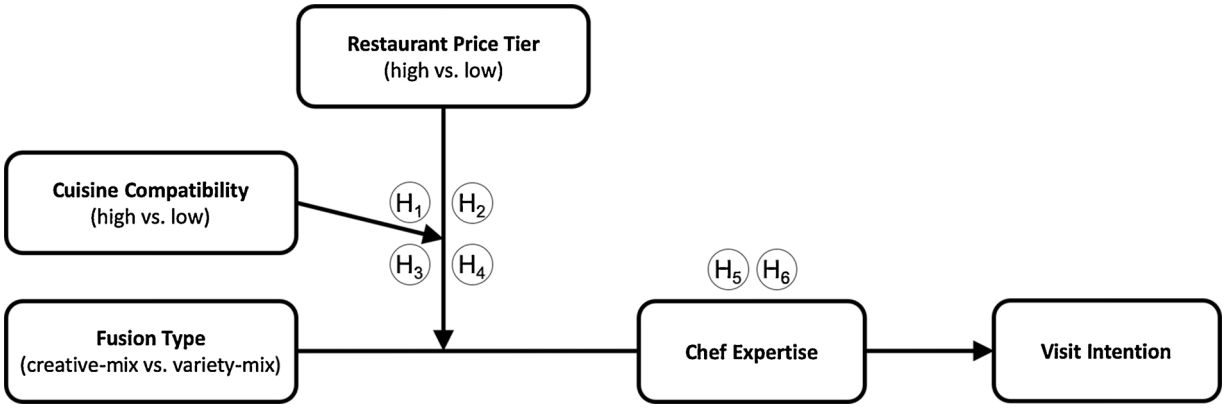

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

equivalence to ensure that, across experimental conditions, our materials resulted in similar levels of fusion perception between the two cuisine styles (i.e., perceiving the fusion as a balanced mix of both cuisine styles rather than belonging primarily to one cuisine style over another). To do so, we asked participants to what extent they felt the restaurant's menu offerings belonged to Japan versus the other country on an 11-point scale (0 = 100% Japanese, 5 = 50% Japanese and 50% [Mexico/Chinese], 10 = 100% [Mexico/Chinese]) adapted from De Keersmaecker et al. (2016).

4. Results

4.1. Manipulation checks

As expected, a three-way ANOVA on the restaurant price tier check scores suggested a main effect of restaurant price tier ($F(1, 307) = 284.79$, $p < .05$), indicating a significant difference between the lower price condition ($M = 2.52$) and the higher price condition ($M = 5.85$). In addition, a three-way ANOVA on the fusion type check scores suggested a main effect of fusion type ($F(1, 307) = 83.82$, $p < .05$), indicating a significant difference between the creative-mix condition ($M = 2.87$) and the variety-mix condition ($M = 4.95$; $t = 9.05$). Similar to the pre-test results, a paired sample t-test re-conformed that "Japanese-Chinese fusion cuisine" (M = 6.03) was perceived as a more compatible fusion cuisine type than "Japanese-Mexican fusion cuisine" (M = 3.59; $t = 11.55$, $p < .05$). Moreover, the mean rating on scenario realism was high ($M = 5.67$; $t = 21.40$, $p < .05$ as compared to the scale midpoint) and did not differ across experimental conditions ($F(1, 307) = .57$, $p = .45$), suggesting that participants perceived the scenarios to reflect real-life restaurant contexts. Finally, the mean rating on perceived fusion equivalence ($M = 5.33$) was about the scale midpoint "5 = 50% Japanese and 50% [Chinese/Mexican]" and did not differ across experimental conditions ($F(1, 307) = .32$, $p = .57$). Such results confirmed that fusion equivalence was achieved across experiment conditions, suggesting that the fusion concepts portrayed in our materials were not perceived as more representative of one cuisine style over another. In conclusion, our experimental manipulations were effective.

4.2. Perceived chef expertise

We conducted a fusion type × restaurant price tier × cuisine compatibility ANCOVA on perceived chef expertise (see Table 1). Product category involvement, liking of Japanese food, liking of Mexican/Chinese food, and frequency of dining out were included as covariates. The results revealed a main effect of fusion type ($F(1, 303) = 6.86$, $p < .05$) and a main effect of cuisine compatibility ($F(1, 303) = 6.16$, $p < .05$). Most importantly, these main effects were qualified by a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier ($F(1, 303) = 13.31$, $p < .05$) and a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and cuisine compatibility ($F(1, 303) = 6.63$, $p < .05$). Guided by our theoretical reasoning, we further examined these main and interaction effects conditioned on cuisine compatibility levels.

Table 1
ANCOVA table for perceived chef expertise.

Outcome variable: Perceived chef expertise		
	F	p
Covariates:		
Involvement	56.33	.00*
Liking of Japanese food	1.30	.26
Liking of Mexican/Chinese food	14.39	.00*
Frequency of dining out	1.03	.31
Independent variables and interactions:		
Fusion type	7.86	.01*
Restaurant price tier	.90	.34
Cuisine compatibility	6.16	.01*
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier	13.3	.00*
Fusion type × Cuisine compatibility	6.63	.01*
Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	.07	.79
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	.01	.91

* p < 05.

When cuisine compatibility was high (see Fig. 2 left panel), there was a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier ($F(1, 303) = 8.835$, $p < .05$). For ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, the creative-mix strategy ($M = 6.06$) led to higher perceived chef expertise than the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.66$; $F(1, 303) = 4.76$, $p < .05$), supporting H1a. As expected, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier, the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.98$) led to marginally higher perceived chef expertise than the creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.59$; $F(1, 303) = 3.61$, $p = .06$). As the effect is only directional, H2a is not supported.

When cuisine compatibility was low (see Fig. 2 right panel), there was a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier ($F(1, 303) = 7.52$, $p < .05$). For ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, the adoption of the creative-mix strategy ($M = 6.08$) led to higher perceived chef expertise than using the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.17$; $F(1, 303) = 20.30$, $p < .001$), which is consistent with H3a. As expected, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier, the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.41$) and creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.59$) led to no significant difference in perceived chef expertise ($F(1, 303) = .87$, $p = .35$), supporting H4a.

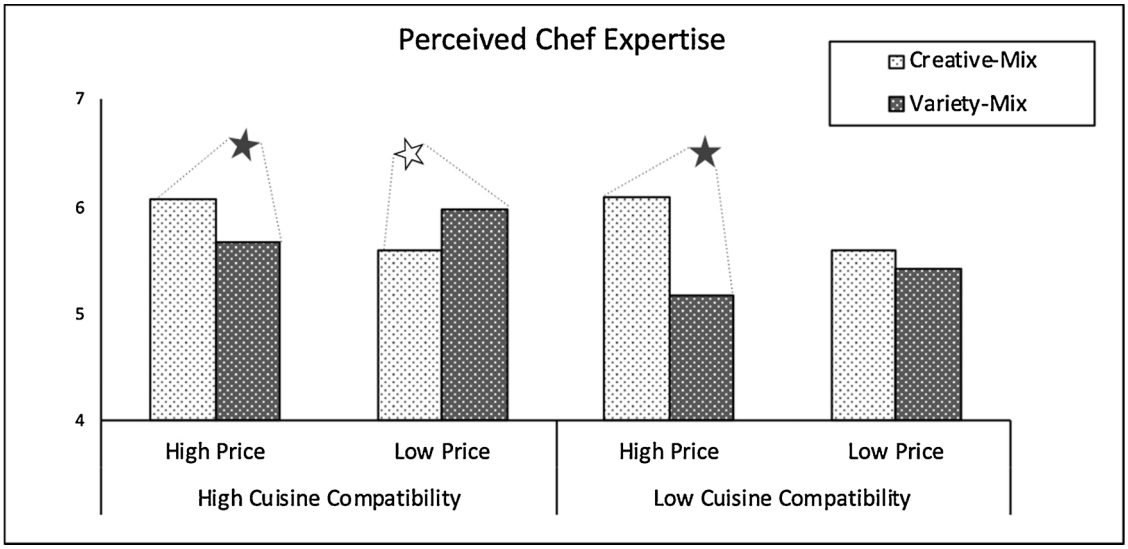

Fig. 2. The impact of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility on perceived chef expertise.
Note: ★ denotes significance at the 0.05 level, while ☆ denotes significance at the 0.10 level.

Table 2
ANCOVA table for visit intention.

Outcome variable: Visit intention		
	F	p
Covariates:		
Involvement	54.10	.00*
Liking of Japanese food	7.30	.02*
Liking of Mexican/Chinese food	9.34	.00*
Frequency of dining out	.05	.82
Independent variables and interactions:		
Fusion type	7.24	.01*
Restaurant price tier	2.59	.11
Cuisine compatibility	.06	.82
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier	18.93	.00*
Fusion type × Cuisine compatibility	7.33	.01*
Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	.62	.43
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	.01	.91

* $p < 05$.

4.3. Visit intention

We conducted a fusion type × restaurant price tier × cuisine compatibility ANCOVA on visit intention (see Table 2). Product category involvement, liking of Japanese food, liking of Mexican/Chinese food, and frequency of dining out were entered as covariates. The results revealed a main effect of fusion type ($F(1, 303) = 7.24$, $p < .05$). Most importantly, it was qualified by a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier ($F(1, 303) = 18.93$, $p < .001$) and a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and cuisine compatibility ($F(1, 303) = 7.33$, $p < .05$). We looked into these main and interaction effects by cuisine compatibility levels.

When cuisine compatibility was high (see Fig. 3 left panel), there was a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier ($F(1, 303) = 7.05$, $p < .05$). Specifically, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, the creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.34$) led to higher levels of visit intention than the variety-mix strategy ($M = 4.78$; $F(1, 303) = 4.14$, $p < .05$), providing support for H1b. In contrast, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier, the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.69$) led to higher levels of visit intention than the creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.14$; $F(1, 303) = 5.06$, $p < .05$), supporting H2b.

When cuisine compatibility was low (see Fig. 3 right panel), there was a significant 2-way interaction between fusion type and restaurant price tier $F(1, 303) = 12.64$, $p < .05$). Specifically, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier, the creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.90$) led to higher levels of visit intention than the variety-mix strategy ($M = 4.38$; $F(1, 303) = 20.09$, $p < .001$), supporting H3b. As expected, for ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier, the variety-mix strategy ($M = 5.22$) and creative-mix strategy ($M = 5.30$) led to no significant difference in visit intention ($F(1, 303) = .29$, $p = .59$), which is consistent with H4b.

4.4. Mediation analysis

To test H5, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis using the percentile bootstrapping approach (PROCESS V3 Model 12; Hayes, 2017). In the model, we specified fusion type as the independent variable, restaurant price tier and cuisine compatibility as moderators, perceived chef expertise as the mediator, and visit intention as the response variable. Product category involvement, liking of Japanese food, liking of Mexican/Chinese food, and frequency of dining out were included as covariates. We used 20,000 bootstrap samples to generate percentile bootstrap confidence intervals. The bootstrapping results revealed a significant moderated mediation through perceived chef expertise when cuisine compatibility was high (index = -0.4467, 95% CI = [-0.8472, -.1029]). Specifically, perceived chef expertise mediated the impact of fusion type on visit intention in the higher price condition (indirect effect = -.2269, 95% CI = [-0.4811, -.0048]) but not in the lower price condition (indirect effect = .2198, 95% CI = [-0.0245, .4964]), supporting H5. The bootstrapping results also indicated a significant moderated mediation through perceived chef expertise when cuisine compatibility was low (index = -.4206, 95% CI = [-0.7886, -.0953]). Specifically, perceived chef expertise mediated the impact of fusion type on visit intention in the higher price condition (indirect effect = -.5213, 95% CI = [-0.8449, -.2535]) but not in the lower price condition (indirect effect = -.1008, 95% CI = [-0.3431, .1154]), which is consistent with H6. Model coefficients for the conditional process model are provided in Table 3.

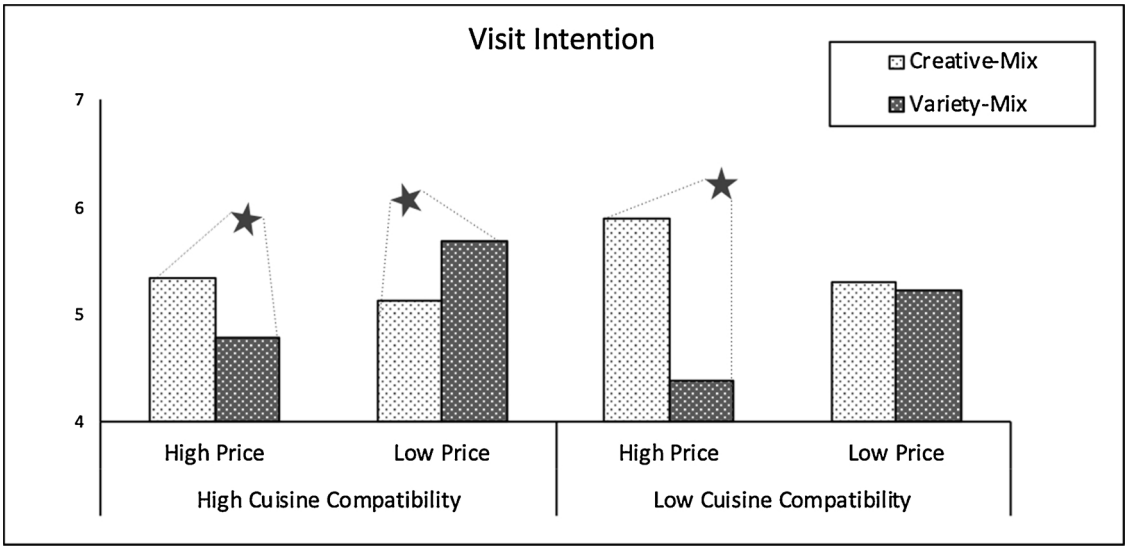

Fig. 3. The impact of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility on visit intention.
Note: ★ denotes significance at the 0.05 level, while ☆ denotes significance at the 0.10 level.

4.5. General discussion

The restaurant industry is witnessing an unprecedented rise of ethnic fusion restaurants (e.g., Sushirrito, a San Francisco based fast casual restaurant chain specialized in Japanese-Mexican fusion; Tosca at The Ritz-Carlton, a Hong Kong based fine dining offering Italian-Asian fusion; Vermilion, a Chicago based casual dining restaurant featuring Latin-Indian fusion). However, the existing hospitality literature provides little guidance on how to leverage marketing strategies to enhance consumer visit intention for ethnic fusion restaurants. To address this gap, the present research examines two types of restaurant fusion strategies—the creative-mix strategy and the variety-mix strategy—and their impact on consumers' restaurant visit intention. Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of these two fusion strategies depends on two critical marketing factors: restaurant price tier and cuisine compatibility. For ethnic restaurants in the higher-price tier, our findings demonstrate that the creative-mix strategy is more effective than the variety-mix strategy in boosting perceived chef expertise and visit intention; such an advantage of the creative-mix strategy is further amplified among those restaurants fusing cuisine styles of low compatibility. For ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier, the variety-mix (vs. creative-mix) strategy is deemed as more appealing to drive visit intention, only when the two fused cuisine styles are of high compatibility. When ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier attempt to fuse two incompatible cuisine styles, the variety-mix strategy loses its competitive advantage over the creative-mix strategy given consumers' credibility concerns. That is, the lower-price tier positioning may potentially conflict with the difficulty of mastering distinct cuisine styles, hindering consumer confidence in the restaurant delivering authentic dishes from distinct culinary roots (Spence, 2018). Results from the moderated mediation analysis provide further empirical evidence to support our theorization that perceived chef expertise explains why ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier can enjoy the competitive advantage of utilizing the creative-mix strategy regardless of cuisine compatibility levels.

4.6. Theoretical implications

Findings from this research provide several important theoretical contributions. Despite ethnic dining concepts' burgeoning popularity in practice and in research (Choi et al., 2018; Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Jang et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2017; Liu and Mattila, 2015; National

Table 3
Model coefficients for the conditional process model.

		Consequent						
		Perceived chef expertise				Visit intention		
Antecedent		Coeff.	*SE*	*p*		Coeff.	*SE*	*p*
Fusion type	a_1	−.1763	.1988	.3758	c_1'	.0215	.2476	.9336
Restaurant price tier	a_2	.4941	.2168	.0234	c_2'	.3177	.2831	.2626
Cuisine compatibility	a_3	.0052	.2159	.9807	c_3'	−.1705	.2795	.5424
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier	a_4	−.7360	.2916	.0121	c_4'	−1.0192	.3813	.0079
Fusion type × Cuisine compatibility	a_5	.5610	.2920	.0557	c_5'	.3176	.3803	.4044
Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	a_6	−.0320	.3085	.9176	c_6'	−.3761	.3993	.3470
Fusion type × Restaurant price tier × Cuisine compatibility	a_7	−.0458	.4186	.9129	c_7'	.3483	.5418	.5208
Perceived Chef Expertise		—	—	—	b	.5715	.0744	< .001
Constant	i_M	3.1114	.3266	< .001	i_Y	−.7489	.4819	.1212
	R^2 = .2961				R^2 = .4745			
	$F(11, 303) = 11.5863, p < .001$				$F(12, 302) = 11.5863, p < .001$			

Covariates: Product category involvement, liking of Japanese food, liking of Mexican/Chinese food, and frequency of dining out.

Restaurant Association, 2018; Youn and Kim, 2017; Trading, 2018), the extant body of hospitality management literature, to date, provides little discussion on the practices and positioning of ethnic fusion restaurants. Filling this void, the current research presents novel insights on fusion restaurant's positioning strategies. Our findings suggest that the successful positioning of an ethnic fusion restaurant depends on three critical factors—fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility. Echoing the classic marketing management literature (Park et al., 1986; Yoo et al., 2000), our findings stress the importance of fit in strategic planning and marketing mix management, demonstrating that ethnic fusion restaurants can achieve a competitive edge by matching the right fusion type with the appropriate price positioning and blending the right pairs of ethnic cuisines.

Our theorizing on the congruency effect of fusion type and restaurant price tier on visit intention is in support of prior research findings illuminating the association between restaurant price tier and core benefits sought. Previous research shows that, in the restaurant industry, while creativity is more heavily emphasized in the high-end haute cuisine segment (Albors-Garrigos et al., 2013; Leschziner, 2015; Stierand and Dorfler, 2012; Yeh and Huan, 2017), variety receives greater highlight among restaurants positioned at lower price (Ha and Jang, 2010a,b; Park, 2004; Ryu et al., 2008, 2010). Consistent with such a pattern of findings, our research presents evidence from the ethnic dining context showing that the creative-mix concept boosts visit intention toward restaurants in the higher-price tier, whereas the variety-mix concept is more effective for restaurants in the lower-price tier.

In addition, we contribute to the hospitality management literature by introducing the notion of cuisine compatibility to ethnic dining research. Drawing from the culinary and semiotics literature (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014), our research findings suggest that cuisine compatibility can be an important boundary factor that moderates the congruency between fusion type and restaurant price tier in ethnic dining. The concept of cuisine compatibility highlights consumers' perceived natural match and harmony between cuisine styles that are associated with distinct cultures or geographic regions (e.g., in terms of ingredients, flavors, and techniques) and can be particularly relevant to the fusion research context (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014). Prior scholarly literature posits that fusion concepts that are developed based on incompatible cuisine styles are likely to cause consumer confusion and thereby lose appeal (Spence, 2018; Stano, 2014). However, our findings suggest that the impact of cuisine compatibility on consumption interest may be more complex than prior theoretical postulations. We show that, indeed, cuisine incompatibility can lower consumption interest for those lower-price tier restaurants utilizing the variety-mix strategy. For those higher-price tier restaurants that adopt the creative-mix strategy, however, cuisine incompatibility can in fact stimulate greater consumption interest. It is worthy to note that, consistent with theory-driven reasoning, our findings show that the comparative advantage of the creative-mix strategy (vs. the variety-mix strategy) on visit intention is more profound for the higher-price tiered restaurants when the cuisine compatibility is low as opposed to high. These results are conceptually in line with prior research demonstrating an expertise signaling process caused by disfluency, featuring technical difficulty as the drive for service competence perceptions—the more challenging a task is (e.g., fusing incompatible cuisine styles into one dining concept), the more a consumer desires professional service and the more competent the service provider is perceived to be (Thompson and Ince, 2013).

Moreover, our findings illuminate the role that perceived chef expertise plays in restaurant choices. From a layman's perspective, chef expertise is widely acknowledged as a main consideration that drives dining decisions (Attenweiler, 2014). Surprisingly, this construct has remained as a relatively underexplored topic in the hospitality literature (Zopiatis, 2010). Our findings show that, in the ethnic fusion context, consumers are likely to judge a chef's expertise through an overall assessment of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine incompatibility. When the restaurant adopts a fusion type that does not fit its positioned price tier (e.g., a lower-price tier restaurant adopting a creative-mix strategy), consumers are inclined to hold a negative judgment over the chef's expertise and thereby become less interested in visiting the restaurant. Such a judgment is driven by plausibility and credibility concerns, as consumers may ponder whether the promised menu offerings will actually be successfully executed, considering the restaurant's price tier and cuisine compatibility level. Our findings provide empirical evidence to demonstrate that such a thinking process about chef expertise can indeed influence consumers' restaurant visit intention, particularly in the high-price tier.

Through the lens of ethnic fusion, our results also speak to the larger phenomenon of how the contemporary American society views, accepts and practices culture mixing (Cheon, 2019; Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016). The present research contributes to the hospitality literature by bringing the novel theoretical perspective of culture mixing to the stream of work on ethnic dining and by mapping the two different fusion strategies onto the two forms of culture mixing—with the creative-mix strategy reflecting "culture fusion" whereas the variety-mix strategy exemplifying "culture co-presentation." Furthermore, previous research in culture mixing shows that the relative appeal of culture mixing types (i.e., culture fusion vs. culture co-presentation) hinges on individual differences such as need for cognitive closure and ideologies (Choi et al., 2018; De keersmaecker et al., 2016). Extending this line of work, our research uncovers that the relative appeal of the culture mixing types can also depend on situational factors, pressing the need for a more in-depth scholarly endeavor to offer nuanced insights on how social contexts shape culture mixing practices. Our investigation in the ethnic fusion dining context suggests that "culture fusion" might be more closely associated with a higher-price tier positioning, while "culture co-presentation" might be more suitable for businesses in the lower-price tier. To that end, our research also joins the scholarly discussion that highlights the cultural underpinning of both food consumption at large and ethnic dining specifically (Fischler, 1980; Kim et al., 2017; Montanari, 2006), calling for future hospitality research to continue such efforts to funnel our understanding about food consumption to the broader discussion on societal issues such as culture mixing.

4.7. Managerial implications

This study offers marketing insights to restaurant operators who attempt to address consumers' increasing interest in ethnic fusion cuisines (National Restaurant Association, 2018). To gain a competitive advantage in the ethnic dining segment, many ethnic restaurants have considered or implemented different types of fusion strategies, such as creative-mix fusion or variety-mix fusion strategies, in their marketing positioning to appeal to a wide range of customers and drive visit intention. However, findings of this research suggest that the choice of creative-mix or variety-mix strategies should be based on the focal restaurant's price tier and cuisine compatibility. Specifically, a creative-mix fusion strategy reflects the idea of "culture fusion" where different cultures are fused together to create a new independent entity. As creativity-centric practices are commonly observed among restaurants in the higher-price tier such as fine dining restaurants, we suggest that the creative-mix fusion strategy naturally fits better with ethnic restaurants adopting a higher price positioning. In contrast, a variety-mix fusion strategy embraces the notion of "culture co-presentation" where different cultures remain as separate entities and are mingled together without being pressed into one. Given that consumers' variety seeking and utilitarian motivations are more salient in the lower-price tier

sector, we suggest that the variety-mix fusion strategy is more conceptually compatible with ethnic restaurants employing a lower price positioning. Ensuring the fit between the restaurant's fusion strategy and pricing is the first step to running a successful ethnic fusion restaurant.

Furthermore, ethnic restaurant owners should pay special attention to the notion of cuisine compatibility, which refers to the extent to which the two fused cuisines are compatible with each other. For example, consumers may perceive the Japanese cooking style and culinary features as more compatible with Chinese cuisine rather than Mexican cuisine. As such, a Japanese-Chinese fusion restaurant, in comparison with a Japanese-Mexican fusion restaurant, connotes a higher level in cuisine compatibility. Cuisine compatibility is a critical contextual factor that has not been well understood by hospitality researchers and practitioners. Findings of this research reveal that the strategic choice of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility should be jointly considered when deriving marketing strategies for an ethnic fusion restaurant. While we show that ethnic fusion restaurants in the higher-price tier can generate higher levels of perceived chef expertise and visit intention through the creative-mix strategy regardless of cuisine compatibility levels, ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower-price tier can generate higher levels of perceived chef expertise and visit intention through the variety-mix strategy only when cuisine compatibility is high. Therefore, managers of ethnic restaurants should be aware that cuisine compatibility plays a critical role in determining the success of creative-mix and variety-mix strategies, and therefore, they should effectively assess and manage customers' perception of cuisine compatibility through consumer research. That is, marketers can conduct survey or interview studies with their target customers to make sure customers' perceived compatibility levels of the fused cuisines are similar to what the ethnic restaurant has aimed at. If there is a gap, marketers may consider providing explanations and stories behind their fusion practices to guide consumers' knowledge of cuisine compatibility. For instance, at first sight, one may not take Korean and Mexican cuisines as a compatible fit to form a fusion concept. However, when shared with the chef's personal story of growing up in a Korean-Mexican neighborhood in South California enjoying bite-size finger foods from both cuisines, consumers may be more likely to perceive a higher level of cuisine compatibility and show more appreciation towards a variety-mix fusion practice.

Finally, the study findings also reveal the importance of a chef's expertise as a crucial underlying reason for customers to visit ethnic fusion restaurants. Hence, on top of the strategic fit among different marketing mixes that we have suggested, marketers could design communication tactics that explicitly express the chef's expertise to potential customers. For example, if the chef is well-known and has been awarded, marketers can communicate those achievements through social media and press releases to promote celebrity chefs. Alternatively, a biography on the menu or on the website highlighting the chef's passion for and experience in ethnic cuisines could also help convey the expert image of the chef. In particular, a demonstration of both receiving formal training experiences as well as practicing at outstanding professional organizations across cuisine styles would greatly enhance a chef's perceived expertise in the ethnic fusion domain, which subsequently boosts consumers' restaurant visit intention.

4.8. Limitations and future research

We would like to address several limitations of this work and suggest some directions for future research. First, our study was conducted through a scenario-based experiment using a set of most popular ethnic cuisine styles to develop the creative-mix and variety-mix conditions. Future work on ethnic fusion restaurants should validate and extend our findings through using other cuisine styles (e.g., Korean, Mediterranean, Italian) and across various populations of interest (e.g., Eastern vs. Western consumers). It is also important to measure how much the participants usually spend on dining out, as it might affect how consumers respond to various restaurant price tiers. Future research should investigate how consumers' spending habits influence their purchase decisions in ethnic dining contexts. In addition, for restaurants with a low-price positioning, consumers' perceived fit between fusion type and price tier may be driving the effects, as opposed to perceived chef expertise. Therefore, future research should measure perceived fit and processing fluency to further understand consumers' decision making regarding ethnic fusion restaurants in the lower price tier. As insightfully pointed out by one of the reviewers, cuisine compatibility may be correlated with perceived variety, which can influence subsequent restaurant evaluations and purchase intentions. Not examined in this research, the conceptual relationship between cuisine compatibility and perceived variety presents itself as an interesting direction that is worthy of future research endeavors. Future research should examine how cuisine incompatibility influences menu variety perceptions and how such perceptions affect consumers' perceived risk and confidence in the restaurant's culinary offerings. Furthermore, the influence of individual differences is out of the scope of the current research and future research could extend this work and explore how individual differences (e.g., dialecticism; Hwang et al., 2018) shape consumer responses to creative-mix and variety-mix strategies. For example, prior research suggests that dialectical thinkers tend to show more confidence when facing incongruent information (Hwang et al., 2018), and therefore, it would be interesting to investigate how consumers who are high in dialecticism react to the mismatch of fusion type, restaurant price tier, and cuisine compatibility. Price sensitivity would be another variable worth considering as a potential moderator, given its impact on product innovativeness such as fusion cuisine (Erdem, Doğdubay, & Sorioğlan, 2012). It would be interesting to examine how price sensitivity buffers the effects between variables in the context of ethnic fusion restaurants.

Finally, we would like to call for more hospitality management research highlighting the cultural underpinning and social significance of food consumption and dining experiences (Kim et al., 2009; Latour and Deighton, 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Poulston and Yiu, 2011). After all, what a food consumption/dining experience means to us as individuals and as a society is way beyond a sensory blast arising at the tip of the tongue (Stano, 2014). As nicely put by the Los Angeles based fusion restaurant "rctngl" on their restaurant website: "*The dining table has always been a symbol of many things: the place where we nourish ourselves, where we come together… share experiences, and create new understandings. Regardless of other differences, all cultures across the world (and through time) view the dining table with the same significance*" (rctngl., 2019). This gives the ending to our fusion story—differences may exist, but love extends.

Appendix Sample Scenario

You are looking for a good restaurant to celebrate a special occasion. Based on your group's taste preference, you are considering the following Japanese-Chinese fusion restaurant:

References

Albors-Garrigos, J., Barreto, V., García-Segovia, P., Martínez-Monzó, J., Hervás-Oliver, J.L., 2013. Creativity and innovation patterns of haute cuisine chefs. J. Culin. Sci. Technol. 11 (1), 19–35.

Attenweiler, S., 2014. Eating Out? Let the Chef Surprise You. Available online through https://www.pilotonline.com/food-drink/article_25c31b36-39c7-5de3-861f-ed995ed8277c.html (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Baek, T.H., Kim, J., Yu, J.H., 2010. The differential roles of brand credibility and brand prestige in consumer brand choice. Psychol. Mark. 27 (7), 662–678.

Buhrmester, M., Kwang, T., Gosling, S.D., 2011. Amazon's Mechanical Turk a new source of inexpensive, yet high-quality, data? Perspect. Psychol. Sci. 6 (1), 3–5.

Burum, L., Nguyen, C.T., Clements, M., 2017. The Find's Best of 2011: Japanese, Mexican, Persian, Thai. Available online through https://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-critics-choice-20120105-story.html (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Choi, S., Liu, S.Q., Mattila, A.S., 2018. Consumer response to authentic-language vs. English-language menu labeling in ethnic dining. Cornell Hosp. Q. 59 (2), 125–134.

Cuevas, E., 2018. Poke Tacos? Carnitas Sushi Roll? New Salinas Restaurant Fuses Mexican, Japanese Cuisine. Available online through https://www.thecalifornian.com/story/news/2018/08/10/bajas-bar-grill-salinas-fuses-mexican-japanese-cuisine/961686002/ (retrieved 10.06.19). .

De Keersmaecker, J., Van Assche, J., Roets, A., 2016. Need for closure effects on affective and cognitive responses to culture fusion. J. Cross. Psychol. 47 (10), 1294–1306.

De La Cruz, R.R., 2019. Culichi Town Brings Mexican-japanese Fusion Menu to Town. Available online through https://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20190130/culichi-town-brings-mexican-japanese-fusion-menu-to-town (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Ebster, C., Guist, I., 2004. The role of authenticity in ethnic theme restaurants. J. Foodserv. Bus. Res. 7 (2), 41–52.

Erdem, T., Swait, J., 2004. Brand credibility, brand consideration, and choice. J. Consum. Res. 31, 191–198.

Erdem, T., Swait, J., Louviere, J., 2002. The impact of brand credibility on consumer price sensitivity. Int. J. Res. Mark. 19 (1), 1–19.

Erdem, T., Swait, J., Valenzuela, A., 2006. Brands as signals: a cross-country validation study. J. Mark. 70 (1), 34–49.

Fischler, C., 1980. Food habits, social change, and the nature/culture dilemma. Soc. Sci. Inf. 19 (6), 937–953.

Greenwald, K., 2015. Josef Centeno's recipe for spring miso-strone soup. Wall Street Journal. Available online through https://www.wsj.com/articles/josef-centenos-recipe-for-spring-miso-strone-soup-1427393351 (retrieved 10.06.19).

Ha, J., Jang, S.S., 2010a. Effects of service quality and food quality: the moderating role of atmospherics in an ethnic restaurant segment. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 2 (3), 520–529.

Ha, J., Jang, S.S., 2010b. Perceived values, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions: the role of familiarity in Korean restaurants. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 29 (1), 2–13.

Ha, J., Jang, S.S., 2013. Variety seeking in restaurant choice and its drivers. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 32, 155–168.

Hayes, A.F., 2017. Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: a Regression-based Approach, 2nd ed. Guilford Press, New York: NY.

Hwang, J., Ok, C., 2013. The antecedents and consequence of consumer attitudes toward restaurant brands: a comparative study between casual and fine dining restaurants. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 32, 121–131.

Hwang, Y., Choi, S., Mattila, A.S., 2018. The role of dialecticism and reviewer expertise in consumer responses to mixed reviews. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 69, 49–55.

Jamal, A., Anastasiadou, K., 2009. Investigating the effects of service quality dimensions and expertise on loyalty. Eur. J. Mark. 43 (3/4), 398–420.

Jang, S.S., Ha, A., Silkes, C.A., 2009. Perceived attributes of Asian foods: from the perspective of the American customers. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 28 (1), 63–70.

Jang, S.S., Ha, J., Park, K., 2012. Effects of ethnic authenticity: investigating Korean restaurant customers in the US. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 31 (3), 990–1003.

Kang, M., 2017. Everything to Know About Ainoko, the Japanese-mexican Tasting Menu in WeHo. Available online through https://la.eater.com/2017/11/22/16691584/ainoko-petite-taqueria-west-hollywood-poppy (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Kim, Y.G., Eves, A., Scarles, C., 2009. Building a model of local food consumption on trips and holidays: a grounded theory approach. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 28 (3), 423–431.

Kim, J.-H., Youn, H., Rao, Y., 2017. Customer responses to food-related attributes in ethnic restaurants. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 61, 129–139.

Latour, K.A., Deighton, J.A., 2019. Learning to become a taste expert. J. Consum. Res. 46 (1), 1–19.

Leschziner, V., 2015. At The Chef's Table: Culinary Creativity in Elite Restaurants. Stanford University Press.

Lewis, R.C., Shoemaker, S., 1997. Price-sensitivity measurement: a tool for the hospitality industry. Cornell Hotel Restaur. Adm. Q. 38 (2), 44–54.

Liu, S.Q., Mattila, A.S., 2015. Ethnic dining: need to belong, need to be unique, and menu offering. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 49, 1–7.

Liu, S.Q., Choi, S., Mattila, A.S., 2019. Love is in the menu: leveraging healthy restaurant brands with handwritten typeface. J. Bus. Res. 98, 289–298.

Melton, H.L., Hartline, M.D., 2010. Customer and frontline employee influence on new service development performance. J. Serv. Res. 13 (4), 411–425.

Montanari, M., 2006. Food Is Culture: Arts and Traditions of the Table. 617 Colombia University Press, New York, NY.

National Restaurant Association, 2018. What's hot: 2018 Culinary Forecast. Available online through https://www.restaurant.org/Restaurant/media/Restaurant/SiteImages/News%20and%20Research/Whats%20Hot/Whats_Hot_Culinary_Forecast_2018.pdf (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Oh, H., 2003. Price fairness and its asymmetric effects on overall price, quality, and value judgments: the case of an upscale hotel. Tour. Manag. 24 (4), 387–399.

Ohanian, R., 1990. Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. J. Advert. 19 (3), 39–52.

Ottenbacher, M., Harrington, R.J., 2007. The culinary innovation process: a study of Michelin-starred chefs. J. Culin. Sci. Technol. 5 (4), 9–35.

Paolacci, G., Chandler, J., Ipeirotis, P.G., 2010. Running experiments on amazon mechanical turk. Judgm. Decis. Mak. 5 (5), 411–419.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Berry, L.L., 1985. A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for Future Research. J. Mark. 49 (4), 41–50.

Park, C., 2004. Efficient or enjoyable? Consumer values of eating-out and fast food restaurant consumption in Korea. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 23 (1), 87–94.

Park, C.W., Jaworski, B.J., MacInnis, D.J., 1986. Strategic brand concept-image management. J. Mark. 50 (4), 135–145.

Parsa, H.G., Njite, D., 2004. Psychobiology of price presentation: an experimental analysis of restaurant menus. J. Hosp. Tour. Res. 28 (3), 263–280.

Passy, C., 2019. I wanted a steak burrito": halal restaurants put Mexican on menu to sate expanding palates. Wall Street Journal. Available online through https://www.wsj.com/articles/i-wanted-a-steak-burrito-halal-restaurants-put-mexican-on-menu-to-sate-expanding-palates-11549033201 (retrieved 10.06.19).

Poulston, J., Yiu, A.Y.K., 2011. Profit or principles: why do restaurants serve organic food? Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 30 (1), 184–191.

rctngl, 2019. About Us: Food for Thought. Available online through https://www.rctngl.la/ (retrieved 10.06.19). .

Roseman, M.G., 2006. Changing times: consumers' choices of ethnic foods when eating at restaurants. J. Hosp. Leis. Mark. 14 (4), 5–32.

Ryu, K., Han, H., 2010. Influence of the quality of food, service, and physical environment on customer satisfaction and behavioral intention in quick-casual restaurants: moderating role of perceived price. J. Hosp. Tour. Res. 34 (3), 310–329.

Ryu, K., Han, H., Kim, T.H., 2008. The relationships among overall quick-casual restaurant image, perceived value, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 27 (3), 459–469.

Ryu, K., Han, H., Jang, S., 2010. Relationships among hedonic and utilitarian values, satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the fast-casual restaurant industry. Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manage. 22 (3), 416–432.

Spence, C., 2018. Contemporary fusion foods: How are they to be defined, and when do they succeed/fail? Int. J. Gastron. Food Sci. 13, 101–107.

Stano, S., 2014. Con-fusion cuisines": melting foods and hybrid identities. *Proceedings of* 674 the World Congress of the IASS/AIS 12th WCS Sofia 2014 New Semiotics between Tradition and 675 Innovation. Available online through http://www.iass-ais.

org/proceedings2014/view_lesson.php?id=134 (retrieved 10.06.19).
Stierand, M.B., Dorfler, V., 2012. Reflecting on a phenomenological study of creativity and innovation in haute cuisine. Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manage. 24 (6), 946–957.
Thompson, D.V., Ince, E.C., 2013. When disfluency signals competence: the effect of processing difficulty on perceptions of service agents. J. Mark. Res. 50 (2), 228–240.
Trading, T., 2018. Global Fusion Dishes Are a Flexible Way to Serve up International Cuisine. Available online through https://www.smartbrief.com/original/2018/02/global-fusion-dishes-are-flexible-way-serve-international-cuisine (retrieved 10.06.19). .
Tsai, C.T., Lu, P.H., 2012. Authentic dining experiences in ethnic theme restaurants. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 31 (1), 304–306.
Wang, C.-Y., Mattila, A.S., 2015. The impact of servicescape cues on consumer pre-purchase authenticity assessment and patronage intentions to ethnic restaurants. J. Hosp. Tour. Res. 39 (3), 346–372.
Wharton, R., 2014. Don't call it fusion cuisine. Wall Street Journal. Available online through https://www.wsj.com/articles/dont-call-it-fusion-cuisine-1393633528 (retrieved 10.06.19).
Wu, Y.C., Tsai, C.S., Hsiung, H.W., Chen, K.Y., 2015. Linkage between frontline employee service competence scale and customer perceptions of service quality. J. Serv. Mark. 29 (3), 224–234.
Yang, Y., Lee, P.K., Cheng, T.C.E., 2016. Continuous improvement competence, employee creativity, and new service development performance: a frontline employee perspective. Int. J. Prod. Econ. 171, 275–288.
Ye, Q., Li, H., Wang, Z., Law, R., 2014. The influence of hotel price on perceived service quality and value in e-tourism: an empirical investigation based on online traveler reviews. J. Hosp. Tour. Res. 38 (1), 23–39.
Yeh, S.S., Huan, T.C., 2017. Assessing the impact of work environment factors on employee creative performance of fine-dining restaurants. Tour. Manag. 58, 119–131.
Yi, Y., 1993. Contextual priming effects in print advertisements: the moderating role of prior knowledge. J. Advert. 22 (1), 1–10.
Yoo, B., Donthu, N., Lee, S., 2000. An examination of selected marketing mix elements and brand equity. J. Acad. Mark. Sci. 28 (2), 195–211.
Youn, H., Kim, J.H., 2017. Effects of ingredients, names and stories about food origins on perceived authenticity and purchase intentions. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 63, 11–21.
Zaichkowsky, J.L., 1985. Measuring the involvement construct. J. Consum. Res. 12 (3), 341–352.
Zeithaml, V.A., 1988. Consumer perceptions of price, quality, and value: a means-end model and synthesis of evidence. J. Mark. 52 (3), 2–22.
Zopiatis, A., 2010. Is it art or science? Chef's competencies for success. Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 29 (3), 459–467.