

A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Rural College Students' Experiences with Ethnic Foods

Direct Original Research

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Abstract

Introduction: While research about multiculturalism has been conducted in urban institutions, little is known about students from predominately white institutions (PWIs) experiences with multicultural opportunities, such as experiences with ethnic foods. This study aimed to qualitatively capture rural college students' salient experiences with ethnic food.

Methods: College students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions regarding a salient experience with an ethnic food, as well as how their ethnicity plays a role in their food choices. Responses to these questions were analyzed using inductive content analysis. Initial codes were created by two authors separately and then compared to assess for congruency.

Results: Three themes were identified from students' responses. First, students often described the authenticity of their ethnic food experiences, which were defined as experiences that were undisputedly created, marketed, or sold by members of that ethnicity/culture. Secondly, most students clearly conveyed affect when describing their experiences as either positive or negative. Finally, most students specifically mentioned the ethnicity or culture that was associated with the food experience.

Conclusions: Overall, most students described authentic and positive ethnic food experiences. This study provides qualitative insight into how one's homogeneous background/educational environment can impact perceptions and experiences with ethnic foods.

Key Words: multicultural, eating, food neophobia, ethnic food

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Introduction

With globalization and migration to the United States (US) and members of ethnic and cultural groups opening culinary places of business, ethnic food consumption in the US has increased in recent years¹. Eating a variety of ethnic foods might create opportunities for individuals to engage with cultures other than their own, furthering their awareness of various ethnic and cultural groups². The term "Ethnic food" has

been used colloquially for a range of food practices³ and can serve a salient role in cultural exchange among people from different cultures and geographical regions. For example, a study of corner stores in Germany showed that small ethnic grocery stores facilitate a positive relationship between the storekeeper/workers and consumers, creating vital spaces for multiculturalism⁴. However, a disproportionately high number of ethnic food outlets exist in urban areas, where elevated migration patterns of ethnically diverse individuals exist⁵. As a result, ethnic food venues (e.g.,



restaurants, bodegas, grocery stores) are not as prevalent in more rural communities, potentially limiting cultural exchanges.

The dearth of cultural exchanges via ethnic food in rural areas is highly impactful, particularly in higher education contexts. Furthermore, college students who attend ruralized institutions may not have as readily access to multicultural experiences (e.g., ethnic foods) in comparison to students in urbanized institutions. Additionally, barriers may also exist within the university itself, as qualitative data measuring students' multicultural sensitivity in two rural higher education institutional settings found that while multicultural education was imperative, rural educational institutions do not provide enough opportunities for students to learn about other cultures in comparison to urban institutions⁶. Altogether, individuals who attend college in rural areas may not readily have access to ethnic foods as those in urban areas.

While research regarding multiculturalism has been conducted in urban institutions⁷, little is known about how more rural, predominately ethnically homogeneous individuals engage with multicultural opportunities such as experiencing ethnic foods. The aims of this study are the following: (1) to qualitatively capture rural college students' salient experiences with ethnic food, and (2) to understand how ethnic food experiences might differ across potential markers of identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, generational status in America), food neophobia, and cultural awareness.

Scientific Methods

Participants

College students ($N = 59$; M age = 19.9, $SD = 2.1$) from a public university in the Midwestern US completed an online survey. Informed consent was obtained via Qualtrics. The university's Institutional Review Board passed all procedures and study information.

Protocol

Participants self-reported age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the immigrant status by generation for the family member that had most recently immigrated to the US. Qualitative data were derived from a larger mixed-methods survey. The following open-ended questions were analyzed: 1) Please tell us a story about an experience you have had with an ethnic food, and 2) How does your ethnicity/culture play into your food choices? Food neophobia was measured using the 10-item Food Neophobia Scale⁸, which assesses unwillingness to try novel foods. Items are measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*disagree extremely*) to 7 (*agree extremely*) ($\alpha = .940$). Cultural awareness was measured using an adapted version of the Cultural Awareness Scale⁹ that was originally used to assess cultural awareness among nursing students. This study used the general education ($\alpha = .838$), cognitive awareness ($\alpha = .716$), and behaviors/comfort with interactions ($\alpha = .714$) subscales from the original measure totaling 27 items. Items were adapted to remove nursing-specific language to capture general college students' cultural awareness and were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Statistical Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed utilizing inductive thematic analysis¹⁰ to build an understanding of the participants' salient experiences with ethnic food. The inductive method takes a 'bottom-up' approach and data drives theme creation. Each theme was given a formal definition and analyzed. Quantitative data were analyzed with a one-way ANOVA to compare the severity of food neophobia and cultural awareness across coded effect of participants' ethnic food stories. All results that had $p \leq 0.05$ were considered statistically significant a priori.

Results

The first theme identified was if the participant's prominent ethnic food experiences were authentic. The majority ($N = 31/59$) reported authentic food experiences, which were defined by the researchers as those that were undisputedly created, marketed, or sold by members of that ethnicity or culture. Nonauthentic experiences were those that did not identify with a culture or were experienced in a manner that was not original to that ethnic food's cultural norms. The second theme that was identified was the affective valence (positive, negative, or neutral) of the food experience. The preponderance ($N = 39/59$) of responses that could be coded on this theme reported a positive food story and fifteen participants reported a 'neutral' food story. Five individuals reported a negative food story in general. We specifically examined these five responses to identify the type of ethnic food that was mentioned with negative affect. Two reported negative Asian food experiences, two with negative Middle Eastern food experiences, and one participant reported a negative story about their Black/Soul food experience. All 59 participants reported a salient food experience. The final theme found in the food stories is a specific ethnicity or culture mentioned. About a third (30.5%) of the



food stories reported were Asian food experiences followed by Hispanic/Latino/a/x cuisine (16.9%), Middle Eastern (15.3%), American food (8.5%), and Black/Soul food stories (8.5%, see Table 1 for example quotes). 20.3% of the quotes did not specify a specific ethnicity in their food story. This theme was examined further to determine if the individual's reported ethnic food experience was related to their ethnicity. Four individuals in the sample identified as Latino/a/x, and three of these four individuals related a food story about Latino/a/x cuisine. However, this was not the case for individuals who identified as a different ethnic minority as well as students who identified as white, who almost exclusively reported on food experiences with a cuisine different from their own ethnic/cultural background.

Table 1. Themes surrounding ethnic food experiences (N = 59).

Theme	Definition	Quote
Authenticity	Undisputedly marketed, or sold by members of that ethnicity or culture.	"I work with an Asian man in a deli who often brings many recipes from home and always has me try new Chinese cuisine."
		"My boyfriend is Japanese, and when I go to visit him, his mother makes the best food!"
		"I have had many experiences of my grandpa having me try Italian foods. One that comes to mind is that my grandpa always requests my grandma to make risotto. She has to ship in saffron, the expensive spice, just to make it the Italian way, but we all love it."
Valence	Affective valence (positive or negative)	"I like most of the ethnic food I have tried. I went to Haiti and very much enjoyed trying the food there."
		"I went to San Diego and had the most authentic tacos I had ever had in my life. It was crazy how different they are to the things we eat I Midwestern Ohio."
		"The first time that I ever had Arabian food I threw up (I had [to be] sick) but I associated that with the food and to this day I will not eat it."
Ethnicity	Specific ethnicity or culture in the food story	I went to Soho for a friend's birthday which is Asian food and I literally was gagging from eating it, forcing it down my throat."
		"My grandma still makes homemade food relative to our ethnic background and I enjoy helping her."
		"My mom is always cooking Dominican Food which I eat very often."

A one-way ANOVA was analyzed to determine mean differences in food neophobia across valence of participants' food experience. Participants were categorized into three groups based on the valence of their qualitative responses (positive = 39, neutral = 15, negative = 5), and this variable was used as the between-subjects variable. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in food neophobia across valence groups of $F(2,56)=3.186, p=.049$. LSD post hoc analyses revealed a significant difference in food neophobia scores between participants who had a positive food story ($M=30.64, SD=12.37$) and negative food story ($M=46.40, SD=15.66$), such that participants with a negative ethnic food story reported higher levels of food neophobia than those with a positive food story. However, there were no significant differences between participants who had a neutral food experience ($M=33.80, SD=14.78$) and those who had positive or negative food experiences. A second one-way ANOVA was conducted among participants' cultural awareness across valence of participants' food experience. No significant differences were found in cultural awareness across valence groups ($p>.05$).

Discussion

Overall, three salient themes were examined in participants' responses: Authenticity, valence, and ethnic origin of the food story. First, a little over half of the participants provided an authentic food experience. Second, the majority of their food experiences were associated with positive affect. When participants were asked to recount an experience with any ethnic food, Asian food was the most commonly reported cuisine. In the first theme, it is important to note that while the researchers operationally defined authenticity, the host culture (i.e., the person, group of people, or restaurant the participant is referring to) did not decide for the participant that the food was authentic, rather, the participant themselves identified the food with authentic qualities. Furthermore, this contributes to the notion ethnic food as a whole is conceptualized and determined by the cultural majority or counterpart². Additionally, authenticity was generally conveyed by the person or group of people that were providing the food, rather than the spice, texture, or other physical qualities of that food.

Most participants who identified as Latinx shared prominent ethnic food stories congruent with their family's culture. *Familismo* is a culturally-rooted construct within the Latinx community that emphasizes unconditional support and a responsibility to care for and be loyal to family members¹¹. Traditionally, meals in this culture are viewed as a time to gather, enjoy, and share a meal together¹². Even after immigrating to the US, many Latinx individuals continue these cultural practices¹³ which might help explain the culturally bound responses in this sample. Finally, a one-way ANOVA revealed that those with negatively coded ethnic food stories scored higher on the food neophobia scale than those with positive food stories. These findings suggest that people's salient ethnic food stories that were negative (e.g., used language with negative affect when describing their experience) might have more severe fears of trying new foods than those who had a positive ethnic food story. However, this comparison did not have equal groups (39 positive, 15 neutral, 5 negative), so it is recommended that the relationship between food neophobia and the way in which participants describe their ethnic food experiences is examined further.

The present findings do not go without limitations. First, they may not be generalizable to other geographical regions of the United States, ethnically/racially minoritized individuals, or age groups. Future research should target a more diverse sample of individuals to better understand how various people experience ethnic foods. Finally, the small sample size in this study makes it difficult to ensure that the prevalence of certain themes is not due to chance. With the identification of these themes, future research can probe these areas (authenticity, valence, ethnicity of choice) more deeply to understand the possible motivation to engage with a particular ethnic food. Additional research in this area might yield a more comprehensive and generalizable understanding of barriers that exist for cultural exchange and diversity in rural food environments. Research should also expand to further understand the diversity of food choices in homogeneous spaces, particularly for ethnically diverse individuals.

Conclusions

As ethnic food trends are increasing in urban areas, it is imperative to recognize the disparity that continues to persist in the access and experience of ethnic food in more rural areas. This study provides insight into individuals living in rural college towns' perceptions and experiences with ethnic foods, as well as potential systemic issues that underlie more negatively affected experiences with ethnic food.

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