The Recipe of Cultural Intelligence and Racial Diversity in Predicting Food Neophobia: A Stepwise Regression Analysis Approach

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This study explored how the cultural intelligence (CQ) and the racial/ethnic experiences of 172 undergraduate students from a Northwestern United States university influenced their levels of food neophobia. Two instruments, the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CSQ) and the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS), were used to collect observations from the sample population (Ang & Dyne, 2008; Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Demographic questions and those related to the racial/ethnic background of participants were also incorporated into the survey. The stepwise regression analysis revealed significant relationships between cultural intelligence, having more than one or multiple ethnic/racial backgrounds or experiences, and food neophobia scores. Findings suggested greater cultural intelligence and more exposure to ethnic/racial backgrounds or experiences are related to lower levels of food neophobia. These results underscore the importance of cultural competence and inclusivity in higher education to promote culinary diversity and minimize food neophobia. Colleges and universities must take note of these important dining findings, which are vital to enrollment and retention strategies and the well-being of their students.

Keywords: cultural intelligence, food neophobia, diversity, inclusion, racial background, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Food neophobia is described in the literature as the reluctance to try new foods. This behavioral trait is influenced by several factors, including cultural background and individual experiences (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Recent research has identified the role of cultural intelligence (CQ) in shaping attitudes towards cultural perceptions (Ang et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2022). CQ, an individual's ability to interact effectively in culturally diverse settings, incorporates four dimensions: cognitive (COG), metacognitive (MET), motivational (MOT), and behavioral (BEH) (Earley & Ang, 2003). In addition, the racial experiences of one's environment has been shown to impact cultural attitudes (Lopez & Guarnaccia, 2000). Despite an increased interest in these areas, little research has evaluated the combined effects of CQ and racial backgrounds on food neophobia.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining how CQ, operationalized through behavioral attributes, and the number of racial backgrounds identified by survey participants influence food neophobia levels. The research has theoretical and practice-based implications for higher education settings, business organizations, and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review synthesizes research on cultural intelligence, racial backgrounds, and ethnic experiences and their effect on food neophobia. Food neophobia has been broadly studied from the perspectives of both individual and cultural differences (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Research distinguishes how food neophobic tendencies are established through heredity, early childhood experiences, and social and cultural contexts (Damsbo-Svendsen & Frost, 2017; Raudenbush et al., 2009).

Food Neophobia

Pliner and Hobden (1992) introduced the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS) to measure reluctance to try new or unfamiliar foods. The FNS consists of 10 items that evaluate avoidance of new or unfamiliar foods and the preference for familiar foods. Age, gender, education level, socio-economic status, and cultural background have been identified as shaping food preferences (Dovey et al., 2008; Laureati et al., 2016).

Age

While food preferences are highly variable, several studies emphasize that food neophobia is more distinct in early childhood and may decrease with age. Food neophobia is considered a child development stage affecting 50-75% of children between the ages of 2-6 years old (Dovey, 2008). Arising as an evolutionary protection mechanism, children reject food with a bitter taste, perceived as being toxic or harmful to them (Marcontell et al., 2003). Flavor-related memories and an introduction to new foods forge future food palates and potential neophobia. A study by Laureati et al. (2016) reported that adults were observed to have lower levels of food neophobia as compared to young adults and children. This research implies that a food palate develops over time, guided by many culinary landscapes of tastes and preferences.

Gender

Evidence from the literature posits that gender may play a role in food neophobia. Findings can vary. Dovey et al. (2008) observed higher food neophobia among females as compared to males of the same age. Gender differences may stem from social and cultural influences related to food acceptance.

Education Level

Education level is also associated with food neophobia. Higher levels of education often align with enhanced culinary comprehension and a willingness to try new foods (Herbert & Siegrist, 2011). Individuals who have attained higher levels of education may present with lower levels of food neophobia. This correlation may be attributed to several factors.

First, higher education provides students with the opportunity to experience a more extensive variety of foods, which can broaden their acceptance of new foods (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Second, education fosters critical thinking skills and cultural awareness, which may translate into a readiness to experiment with unfamiliar foods (Tuorila et al., 2001). Finally, higher education often promotes health literacy and wellness, including the nutritional benefits of foods, which can moderate concerns about unfamiliar foods (Rosenblum & Miller, 2010).

Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic status (SES) can also affect food neophobia. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds may experience higher levels of food neophobia due to limited access to diverse foods. These individuals may prioritize familiar, cost-effective options (Holm et al., 2015); Mancino et al., 2009). Economic constraints may restrict culinary experiences and heighten food neophobia.

Conversely, individuals with a higher SES tend to have more access to diverse food options. Higher SES individuals may benefit from social networks that encourage food exploration and experimentation (Hartmann & Siegrist, 2017).

Cultural Background

Cultural factors significantly influence food neophobia (Knaapila et al., 2007). Research has shown that individuals from cultures with more diverse traditions may have lower levels of food neophobia. A study by Tuorila et al. (2001) found that individuals from countries with a wide range of available food options tended to have lower food neophobia scores. Studies consistently demonstrate that individuals from cultures with diverse culinary traditions tend to exhibit lower levels of food neophobia.

Higher education settings, especially those with a strong international student enrollment, cultivate student interactions with peers from distinct cultural backgrounds. A diverse setting promotes the discovery of new cuisines through dining halls, cultural events, and campus activities. Institutions of higher learning that foster a more supportive environment for students to expand their palate may also contribute to a more inclusive campus culture.

Food Neophobia in Higher Education

Research examining food neophobia in higher education often explores how racial backgrounds intersect with attitudes toward food. Byrd-Bredbenner et al. (2017) investigated food neophobia among college students in the United States and specifically focused on racial and ethnic differences. They found that Black students reported higher levels of food neophobia as compared to White students. Black students expressed preferences for traditional foods and were more hesitant to try unfamiliar foods, which contributed to higher levels of food neophobia.

Another study by Larson et al. (2006) explored food neophobia among college students in the United States. This study investigated how cultural identity and food preferences change dietary behaviors. They found that students from diverse racial backgrounds often faced challenges navigating campus dining options catering to their dietary needs and preferences. This led to higher levels of food neophobia among minority students who felt marginalized and underrepresented in food offerings on campus.

Cultural Intelligence

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has emerged as a critical construct in understanding individuals' ability to interact, learn, and work across cultures effectively. CQ encompasses multiple dimensions that enable individuals to navigate and adapt to diverse cultural settings. One prominent framework for CQ was developed by Earley and Ang (2003), which outlined four dimensions: 1) cognitive (COG), 2) motivational (MOT), 3) behavioral (BEH), and 4) metacognitive (MET).

CQ Constructs

The cognitive dimension of CQ refers to an individual's appreciation of cultural similarities and differences. CQ involves awareness of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and practices, which helps interpret cross-cultural interactions (Earley & Ang, 2003). Individuals high in cognitive CQ are adept at deciphering cultural cues, facilitating more effective communication and decision-making in multicultural environments (Ang et al., 2007).

MOT pertains to an individual's readiness to engage with people from unfamiliar cultures. It is the extent to which individuals are open-minded and initiative-taking in seeking out cross-cultural experiences (Van Dyne et al., 2012). MOT drives individuals to learn about and value cultural diversity (Ang et al., 2007).

BEH focuses on an individual's ability to demonstrate appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors in diverse cultural contexts. High BEH enables individuals to establish and build rapport and trust with individuals from varied cultural backgrounds through effective communication and interpersonal skills (Ang et al., 2007; Van Dyne et al., 2012).

MET involves the awareness and control of an individual's assumptions and biases and the ability to reflect on and adjust one's thinking and behaviors in response to cross-cultural interactions (Ang et al., 2007). MET enhances the capacity for self-regulation and adaptation in multicultural settings, facilitating more nuanced and contextually appropriate responses (Earley & Ang, 2003). Individuals from multicultural

environments often exhibit greater openness to diverse cultural practices, including food preferences (Lopez & Guarnaccia, 2000; Pauwels & Matoba, 2014; Sam & Berry, 2010).

Cultural Intelligence in Higher Education

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has been increasingly recognized as an essential competency for college students' academic performance and to prepare them for a globalized workforce. CQ enables students to navigate multicultural environments effectively. A study by Van Dyne et al. (2012) stated that students with higher CQ scores integrate more seamlessly into diverse work and learning environments. Similarly, research by Ang et al. (2007) described the importance of CQ in facilitating classroom collaborations among students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, students with higher CQ are better equipped to engage in international study abroad programs and multicultural activities (Marginson, 2012).

Cultural Intelligence and Food Neophobia

Limited research exists to evaluate CQ, racial backgrounds, and the effects on food neophobia. Research supports the theme that cultural intelligence is integral in shaping attitudes and behaviors toward food preferences (Ang et al., 2015; Peltzer et al., 2013). This adaptability is necessary in multicultural societies and organizations where exposure to various foods is conventional (Sam & Berry, 2010). To connect with this stream of research, the racial composition of one's social network may further acceptance of new foods (Lopez & Guarnaccia, 2000; Pauwels & Matoba, 2014; Sam & Berry, 2010). Despite the emerging body of food neophobia research, cultural intelligence, and the composition of one's racial and ethnic networks, few studies have unified these factors to explore their collective influence on dietary preferences.

HYPOTHESES

The hypothesis that CQ will be negatively related to food neophobia is grounded in several key studies and their empirical findings. CQ enhances receptivity to new foods by promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity (Ang et al., 2007; Berry et al. 2022). Moreover, greater interactions with diverse racial backgrounds promote higher CQ (Sam & Berry, 2010). These interfaces may encourage more acceptance of new foods, reducing food neophobia (Pauwels & Matoba, 2014). Based on these insights, a hypothesis can be formulated that more diverse cultural connections in institutions of higher learning are negatively associated with food neophobia.

H_A: *Cultural Intelligence (CQ) and the number of self-identified racial backgrounds will be negatively related to Food Neophobia.*

This hypothesis and the potential relationships detected through a scan of the literature highlight the role of educational institutions in promoting cultural competence and culinary openness among their student populations.

METHODS

The methods section describes how the study was conducted. This includes details on participants, measures, procedures, data analysis techniques, and the regression design.

Participants

172 participants (52 females, 30.2%; 120 males, 69.8%) were recruited for this study through convenience sampling at a university. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 36 years old. Approximately 70% of the sample self-reported as male and between the ages of 17-22. Most of the sample consisted of first-year students (28.5%), sophomores (25.0%), and juniors (21.5%). Table 1 provides the frequencies and percentages of the demographic variables for the entire sample.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGES OF DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Ethnic Backgrounds

Age (years)	N = 172 Quantity	Percentage	From a Number of Ethnic Backgrounds	From one Ethnic Background	Not Identified
17 to 22	120	69.8%	65	54	1
23 to 26	28	16.3%	17	11	0
27 to 30	8	4.7%	3	5	0
31 to 34	5	2.9%	4	1	0
>34	11	6.4%	1	10	0
College Level					
Freshman	49	28.5%	31	29	0
Sophomore	43	25.0%	23	20	0
Junior	37	21.5%	17	20	0
Senior	25	14.5%	10	15	0
Graduate	15	8.7%	8	7	0
Other	3	1.8%	1	2	0

Measures

Food neophobia was assessed using the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS), a validated 10-item questionnaire designed to measure individuals' reluctance to try new or unfamiliar foods (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater food neophobia.

Cultural intelligence (CQ) was measured using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), adapted from Ang et al. (2007) and rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale was divided into the four subcomponents. The average of the first four questions was used to measure MET.COG was measured by averaging the next six questions. The following five questions were used to measure MOT, and the average of the last five questions were used to measure BEH.

Racial backgrounds were self-identified by student participants. They were asked if their primary friendship group in high school consisted of peers mainly from the same, one, or multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds as themselves. The variable was coded as 1 for multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds and 0 otherwise.

Procedure

Data collection took place over an academic year. The survey was administered primarily in undergraduate business courses. However, business majors and nonmajors were part of the sample since several courses fulfilled general education requirements. The respondents' anonymity was protected. Students were provided with class time to complete the survey in person. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The professor administered and collected the survey. No incentives were provided for the completion of the survey.

Design

The hypothesis was tested using stepwise regression analyses. The dependent variable was food neophobia (FN). The independent variables were the four subconstructs of CQ (MET, COG, MOT, and BEH) and the number of racial backgrounds self-identified by the participants (NRB). Negative coefficients significantly differing from zero on the test variables indicate support for the hypothesis.

TABLE 2
STEP-WISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Step 1		
Variable	**Coefficient**	**_t_-value**
Intercept	49.513	13.030***
(MOT)	-4.024	-5.691***
_R_-Square	.160	
Adjusted R-Squared	.155	
Step 2		
Variable	**Coefficient**	**_t_-value**
Intercept	50.259	13.450***
(MOT)	-3.711	-5.281***
(NRB) Number of Racial Backgrounds	-4.564	-2.775***
_R_-Square	.197	
Adjusted R-Squared	.187	
Step 3		
Variable	**Coefficient**	**_t_-value**
Intercept	54.811	13.672***
(MOT)	-2.281	-2.658***
(NRB) Number of Racial Backgrounds	-.4791	-2.968***
(MET)	-2.291	-2.796***
_R_-Square	.232	
Adjusted R-Squared	.219	

Note. * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results from the stepwise regression analysis are shown in Table 2. During step 1, MOT was significant at the $p<.01$ level and negatively related to FN. This simple regression had an adjusted R-squared of 0.160. The second step resulted in NRB being entered into the model. NRB and MOT were both significant at the $p<.01$ level and negatively related to FN. The regression model had an adjusted R-square of 0.187. The final step resulted in the additional MET variable entering the model. Again, all three variables were significant at the $p<.01$ level and negatively related to FN. The adjusted R-squared of this model was 0.219. To interpret the findings, individuals with a high MOT and MET tend to eat fewer new foods than those with a low MOT and MET. Similarly, individuals who self-report as having a social group of friends with more racial backgrounds have a lower tendency to avoid new foods as compared to individuals with fewer racial backgrounds.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The discussion interprets the results relative to the research hypothesis, considers the implications of the findings, offers strengths and limitations of the study, and provides future research areas for consideration. The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of the complex interactions between cultural intelligence (CQ), racial or ethnic background experiences or connections, and food neophobia. Consistent with previous research (Berry et al. 2022), higher levels of cultural intelligence were associated with lower levels of food neophobia among college students aged 17 to 36. Students who reported more excellent interactions with and connections with multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds exhibited lower levels of food neophobia, particularly when combined with increased cultural intelligence

(CQ). Results suggest that experiences with diverse racial groups may foster cultural competence and reduce aversions to unfamiliar foods.

Food neophobia exhibits a definitive racial background pattern pertinent within a higher education setting. Research is consistent in that food neophobia follows a developmental trajectory. As students progress through their college experiences, they are more likely to explore diverse cuisines and develop a more adventurous palate.

Institutions of higher learning often provide environments that encourage experimentation with new foods, whether through dining services that offer international cuisine or multicultural events that celebrate diverse culinary traditions. By understanding the developmental aspect of food neophobia, educators and administrators can better support initiatives that promote food exploration and cultural awareness among students, contributing to their overall educational experience and personal growth.

Mitigating food neophobia at college and university settings is a priority for fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) among students and furthering enrollment management strategies. Food neophobia can serve as a barrier to cultural understanding and inclusivity on campuses. Research indicates that exposure to diverse culinary experiences can significantly contribute to the cultural competence and empathy among students (Hernandez et al., 2018).

Addressing food neophobia aligns with enrollment management goals by improving the attractiveness of institutions to a wider range of prospective students. Students increasingly value campus environments that embrace diversity and offer opportunities for multicultural engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Institutions that promote diverse food options and cultural events can differentiate themselves in the competitive landscape of higher education. This strategic approach not only supports DEI goals but also strengthens recruitment and retention efforts by creating inclusive environments where students feel valued and supported in exploring new cultural perspectives.

Practical Implications

Corporations and colleges, alike, should invest resources to enhance cultural intelligence among their stakeholders. Further promotion of diversity and inclusion could foster environments where diverse interactions palliate food neophobia. Implementation steps may include training, workshops, cross-cultural teams, and cultural events. Training and workshops should be conducted regularly to provide professional development on cultural awareness, sensitivity, and communication. These workshops could include information about different cultural norms related to food, dining etiquette, and culinary history and traditions. Cross-functional teams should be formed to represent diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. These teams collaborate on projects, sharing insights and perspectives. Finally, cultural events could be organized where employees can showcase their heritage through food, music, and traditional attire. These events provide opportunities for informal interactions that promote understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures.

From the perspective of higher education, colleges and universities should support more diverse student organizations, dining hall diversity, and cross-cultural exchanges. Diverse student-run organizations should celebrate distinct cultures. These groups can host cultural festivals, food tastings, and seminars, podcasts, and educational sessions about various cuisines. Dining hall diversity could incorporate a variety of culturally diverse food options with theme nights featuring dishes from different countries or regions, prepared authentically by chefs familiar with those cuisines. Cross-cultural exchange programs and study abroad opportunities should continue to be promoted to provide students with opportunities to learn more about unfamiliar cultural environments. Encouraging students to share their experiences with peers can foster a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity.

Students with more diverse cultural experiences through these initiatives are likely to develop an enhanced cultural competence. They learn to respect and engage with cultural differences, enhancing their ability to interact effectively in multicultural settings. By regularly encountering and experiencing new foods in a supportive and inclusive environment, students are more likely to overcome food neophobia. They may develop a curiosity and appreciation for diverse cuisines, making them more willing to try unfamiliar foods.

Both in workplaces and educational institutions, promoting diversity and inclusion fosters a sense of belonging and respect among individuals from different racial backgrounds. This contributes to a more cohesive and supportive environment where cultural differences are valued. Over time, the cumulative effect of these initiatives can lead to a workforce or student body that is not only more culturally diverse but also more culturally competent. This prepares students to navigate globalized environments with more cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this study include the reliance on self-reported measures and the use of convenience sampling, which may limit generalizability to broader populations. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to explore the long-term effects of cultural intelligence development on food preferences and behaviors across different demographic groups. This sample should be extended to include a more diverse representation of higher education institutions, those of varying sizes and locations in the United States and beyond, and students enrolled in other academic programs and courses outside of business and focusing on those initiatives that reduce food neophobia.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the role of cultural intelligence and exposure to diverse racial backgrounds in forming attitudes towards food neophobia. The findings identify the potential benefits of promoting cultural competence and intercultural interactions to enhance food familiarity and acceptance of novel foods. Practical implications suggested include the development of educational programs and interventions that foster cultural intelligence skills.

Mitigating food neophobia in higher education institutions not only promotes cultural understanding and inclusion but also aligns with strategic enrollment management objectives. By fostering environments that encourage culinary diversity and intercultural dialogue, universities can attract and retain a diverse student body while preparing graduates to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

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