

Halal Food Perspectives: A cross-sectional survey of neophobic and neophilic mindsets

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between halal food and food neophobia in Malaysia. A total of 399 participants were surveyed using the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS). Neophobic individuals were most likely to be generation Z, male, had less than tertiary education, and had a salary less than RM1000. They tended to avoid food due to halal status and weird taste. The findings provide insights into the level of food neophobia among Malaysians and its impact on their acceptance of halal food. The results can aid policymakers and industry stakeholders in promoting inclusive and culturally sensitive food choices.

Keywords: halal; food neophobia; Malaysia

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1.0 Introduction

Halal food holds significant implications for individuals with food neophobia, as it provides a sense of assurance and trustworthiness in terms of dietary choices. Food neophobia refers to the fear or aversion towards new or unfamiliar foods (Cooke, 2018), which can result in limited food preferences and dietary patterns. For individuals with food neophobia, the concept of halal food becomes particularly relevant as it encompasses not only the ingredients and processing methods but also the assurance of adherence to Islamic dietary laws and regulations (Akhtar et al., 2020). The presence of halal certification and labeling instills a sense of familiarity and trust, making halal food more appealing and acceptable to individuals with food neophobia.

Halal food offers a structured framework and set of guidelines that can alleviate the anxieties associated with food neophobia. The strict criteria for halal certification provide reassurance to individuals with food neophobia that the food has undergone a rigorous process and is free from any doubtful or prohibited substances (Sofiana et al., 2021). This certainty and transparency in the production and sourcing of halal food can help alleviate the apprehensions and concerns related to trying new or unfamiliar foods. Individuals with food neophobia may feel more comfortable exploring and expanding their food choices within the halal category, knowing that the food meets specific standards and is aligned with their cultural and religious beliefs.

Furthermore, the availability and accessibility of a wide range of halal food options can facilitate the gradual exposure and desensitization of individuals with food neophobia. Halal food encompasses diverse cuisines, ingredients, and flavors, providing opportunities for individuals to gradually expand their food preferences. As individuals with food neophobia become more familiar with and confident in the halal food offerings, they may develop a greater willingness to try new and diverse foods within the halal spectrum.

This exposure to different tastes and textures can help mitigate the fear of novelty and enhance their overall food acceptance and enjoyment.

According to a recent systematic review, the investigation of food neophobia in Southeast Asia has been limited, with only one study conducted in Indonesia (Fibri and Frøst, 2019). The majority of studies on this topic have been carried out in developed countries, primarily in the United States and Europe (Rabadán and Bernabéu, 2021). Therefore, there is a notable gap in the literature when it comes to understanding the specific influences of food neophobia on individuals' acceptance and consumption of halal food.

This study aimed to address this research gap by examining the relationship between food neophobia and the consumption of foreign food in halal status. By exploring the impact of food neophobia on individuals' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors regarding halal status in foreign food, this research will contribute valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge. The inclusion of halal food in the investigation of food neophobia will shed light on how individuals with food neophobia perceive and approach the concept of halal, and whether it serves as a facilitator or barrier to their dietary choices. Moreover, the study will explore the potential factors that may influence the relationship between food neophobia and halal food acceptance, such as cultural background, religious beliefs, and familiarity with halal certification systems. By delving into these aspects, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between food neophobia and the consumption of halal food, thus providing practical implications for the food industry, policymakers, and health professionals in promoting inclusive and culturally sensitive food choices.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Halal Food

In recent times, there has been a notable rise in the consumption of halal food, particularly among non-Muslim consumers. This can be attributed to the significant growth potential of the halal food market, which is expanding not only in Malaysia but also worldwide, encompassing both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries. With the global Muslim population currently nearing two billion and projected to reach 2.2 billion by 2030, the demand for halal food is expected to steadily increase in the coming years.

Halal food goes beyond mere dietary preferences; it encompasses a holistic approach that covers every aspect of the food production process, from farm to fork. When people refer to halal food, they are referring to a set of regulations derived from Islamic law, known as Shariah, that governs the preparation and consumption of food. These regulations encompass various elements, including hygiene standards, the avoidance of *syubhah* (doubtful) and *haram* (forbidden) substances, and the careful selection of raw materials and equipment used in food processing.

To ensure food is halal, the entire production process must comply with Shariah regulations. This includes stringent standards of cleanliness and hygiene throughout each stage, from sourcing ingredients to processing, packaging, and distribution (Sofiana et al., 2021). *Syubhah* substances, which are doubtful in their halal status, are avoided to maintain the integrity of the halal food. Additionally, all raw materials, machinery, and utensils used in the process must be carefully evaluated to ensure they meet halal requirements. This comprehensive approach is taken to provide assurance to consumers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that the food they consume aligns with their religious and dietary beliefs.

By adhering to the principles of halal food production, it not only satisfies the needs of Muslim consumers but also resonates with individuals seeking food that adheres to ethical, quality, and hygienic standards. The significance of halal food extends beyond religious observance, as it encompasses a broader commitment to transparency, integrity, and conscious consumption. As such, the demand for halal food continues to grow, driven not only by the Muslim population but also by an increasing number of non-Muslim consumers who value the holistic approach and the assurance it provides in terms of food safety and compliance with religious and ethical standards.

Previous research has primarily centered around various aspects related to halal food, including studies on halal food quality (Jia and Chaozhi, 2021), halal food certification (Takeshita, 2019), halal supply chain (Khan et al., 2022), and halal orientation strategy (Zailani et al., 2020). A study was carried out among non-Muslim individuals residing in Malaysia, focusing on their perceptions of halal food. The findings revealed that these participants held the belief that food certified as halal was associated with enhanced safety measures and superior quality compared to non-halal alternatives (Mathew, Abdullah, & Ismail, 2014). Consequently, they actively sought out halal-certified food products based on these reasons.

2.2 Food Neophobia

Food neophobia can be defined as the fear of trying new food (Cooke, 2018). People with food neophobia are very skeptical of foods they have never tried before or foods that are prepared differently than they are used to. This disorder shows a lack of interest in eating, which can lead to an imbalanced diet and reduced consumption of nutrient-rich new foods, such as foreign cuisine, resulting in the potential loss of nutritional benefits (Łoboś and Januszewicz, 2019).

Food neophobia is a common phenomenon across different cultures, though it may manifest differently in other societies. For example, in Italy, the researcher did an online survey to find out the ethnic food consumption and the role of food neophobia and openness to different cultures (Mascarello, et al., 2019). The survey showed that people who were less educated, did not explore current trends, had difficulty meeting their financial responsibilities, and did not eat ethnic food were mostly neophobic.

In Malaysia, no recent research was conducted among adults with food neophobia. A previous article in 2015, discussed food neophobia among students at higher education institutions in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The researchers distributed a questionnaire to 200 students within Klang, Shah Alam, and Subang. The study revealed that Malay students exhibited higher levels of food neophobia compared to Indian and Chinese students. Furthermore, students from rural and semi-rural areas demonstrated greater food neophobia

tendencies than their urban counterparts (Muhammad et al., 2015). The findings led to the conclusion that young adults with limited openness to new experiences and a less exploratory mindset were more prone to developing food neophobia.

2.3 Food Neophobia, Neophilic and Its Implications Towards Halal Food Products

Food neophobia can impact social interactions and cultural integration within halal communities. Trying new foods is often a way to connect with others, share experiences, and celebrate diverse culinary traditions. When individuals are neophobic, they may resist trying new halal foods, leading to a limited understanding and appreciation of different cultural cuisines (Jaeger, 2017). This can hinder the development of strong bonds and cultural exchange within halal communities, as food plays a vital role in bringing people together and fostering connections.

On the other hand, individuals who are food neophilic tend to be more open to trying new and diverse halal dishes. Their willingness to explore different culinary traditions can enhance cultural integration within halal communities. By embracing a variety of halal cuisines, neophilic individuals contribute to a more inclusive and vibrant cultural exchange, strengthening social ties and enriching the overall community experience. This underscores the importance of considering food neophilia as a factor that not only influences individual food choices but also contributes to the cultural dynamism within halal communities.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional study design with the quantitative method in the form of a survey questionnaire that was developed based on previous research and specific measurement items. The research focused on all generations in Malaysia, including generation Z, X, Y, and baby boomers. The survey questionnaire was distributed online using Google Form, and a total of 399 participants were obtained for data analysis. The survey was disseminated among the general public in Malaysia to assess their level of food neophobia, specifically regarding foreign cuisine in Malaysia. The demographic information of the participants included gender, marital status, education status, occupation, salary, and whether they had visited a foreign country or not.

The questionnaire also included the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS) to measure the fear of unfamiliar or foreign foods. FNS was developed by Pliner and Hobden and it comprises ten questions such as constantly sampling new and different foods, trusting new foods, avoiding foods with unknown ingredients, liking foods from different countries, finding ethnic food too weird to eat, trying new foods at dinner parties, being afraid to eat things never had before, being very particular about the foods one will eat, being willing to eat almost anything, and liking to try new ethnic restaurants (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). To calculate the scores, the responses are summed and averaged, taking into account that items 1, 4, 6, 9, and 10 are reverse-scored. A higher mean score indicates a higher level of food neophobia, reflecting a greater reluctance to explore or try new and unfamiliar foods. Based on their scores, individuals were classified into three groups: neophobic, neutral, and neophilic. Individuals scoring below 33 were categorized as neophilic, while those with scores falling between 33 and 47 were classified as neutral. Individuals scoring above 48 were categorized as neophobic.

The analysis was conducted by using SPSS version 28. To investigate the relationship between individuals categorized as neophobic, neutral, or neophilic and their respective motivations for either trying or avoiding foreign foods, we employed the Chi-square Test, a statistical method commonly used for analyzing categorical data and assessing associations. This analysis chose a significance level of 0.05 as the threshold, often referred to as the p-value. This threshold serves as the dividing line for determining statistical significance. If the p-value obtained from the Chi-square Test was less than 0.05, it indicated a statistically significant association between individuals' neophobia/neophilic classification and their reasons for engaging with or avoiding foreign cuisines. The predominant reasons expressed by the participants were then identified according to their respective groups.

4.0 Findings

The demographics of the participants are shown in Table 1. The study included 399 participants with a mean age of 27.02±13.10 years. The majority of the participants were from Generation Z (72.9%), followed by Generation Y (8.8%), Generation X (15%), and baby boomers (3.3%). Most of the respondents were female (69.4%), and the majority were single (63.9%). Regarding education level, most of the respondents had tertiary education (90%), and most were students (67.4%) with non-salary jobs (66.9%).

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants (n=399)

Variable	n (%)
Age, mean (SD)	27.02 ± 13.10
≤25 (Generation Z)	291 (72.9)
26 – 41 (Generation Y)	35 (8.8)
42 – 57 (Generation X)	60 (15.0)
≥58 (Baby boomers)	13 (3.3)
Gender	
Male	122 (30.6)
Female	277 (69.4)
Marital Status	
Single	255 (63.9)

Married	103 (25.8)
Divorced	2 (0.5)
In a relationship	39 (9.8)
Education Level	
Primary	1 (0.2)
Secondary	39 (9.8)
Tertiary	359 (90.0)
Occupation	
Not working	18 (4.5)
Student	269 (67.4)
Government	47 (11.8)
Private	33 (8.3)
Self-Business	32 (8.0)
Salary	
None	267 (66.9)
Less than RM1000	22 (5.5)
RM1001 – RM2500	23 (5.8)
RM2501 – RM5000	32 (8.0)
More than RM5000	55 (13.8)
Have visited a foreign country	
No	207 (51.9)
Yes	192 (48.1)

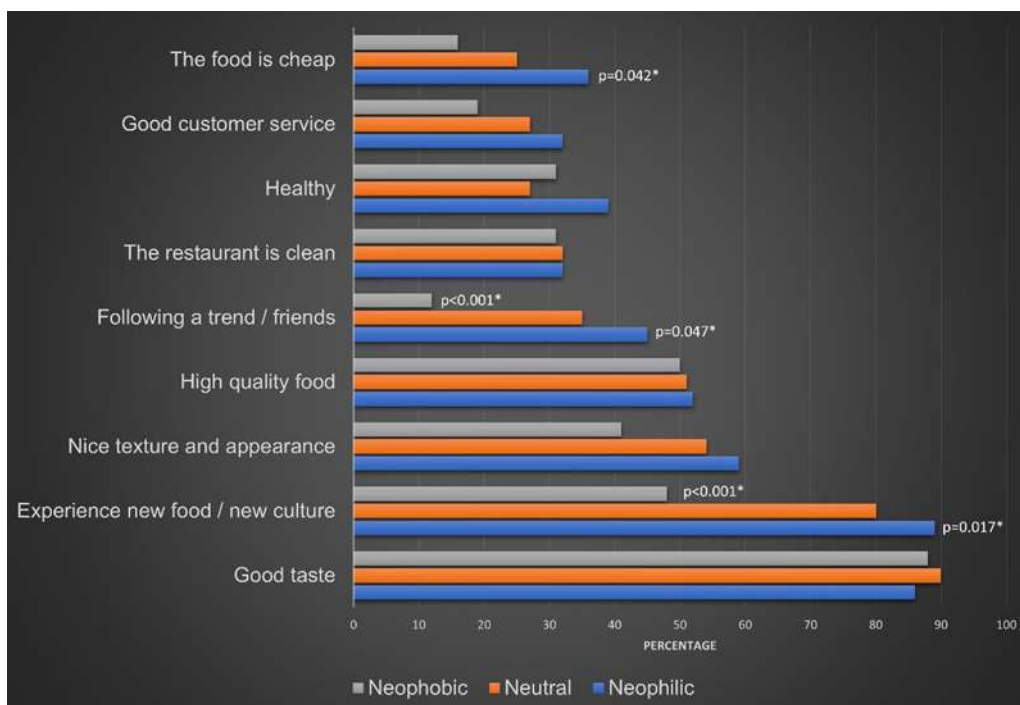


Fig. 1: Reasons to taste foreign foods

The majority of Generation Z participants were neophobic (78.6%), followed by Generation X (37.9%), Generation Y (13.8%), and baby boomers (6.9%). Male respondents tended to be neophobic (34.5%), while female respondents tended to be neophilic (78.6%). Respondents with a single marital status tended to be neophilic (78.6%), while divorced participants were neophobic (60.3%). Tertiary level respondents were mostly neophilic (98.2%), while secondary level respondents were mostly neophobic (17.2%). Respondents who were not working tended to be neophobic (6.9%), while most students were neophilic (73.2%). Government sector respondents were mostly neophobic (24.1%), while most private sector respondents were neophilic. Self-business respondents were mostly neophilic

(20.7%), and respondents with no salary were mostly neophilic (71.4%). Respondents with a salary less than RM1000 tended to be neophobic (5.2%), while those with a salary between RM1001 and RM2500 tended to be neophilic. Respondents with a salary between RM2501 and RM5000 were mostly neophobic, while those with a salary over RM5000 were also neophobic (34.5%).

Korean cuisine received the highest preference, with 80.5% of respondents expressing a liking for it. Thai food also garnered significant favor, with 72.3% of respondents enjoying it. Western cuisine was well-received, with 79.5% of respondents indicating a preference for it. Japanese food had a majority (64.9%) expressing fondness for it. On the other hand, French food had the highest percentage of respondents (55.8%) expressing a lack of interest in it. Chinese cuisine also had a notable portion of respondents (57.8%) stating a preference against it. In summary, Korean, Thai, and Western foods were the most liked among respondents, while French and Chinese foods were the least preferred. Italian food received mixed reviews, and Japanese and Indian foods had more individuals expressing a liking for them, although still significant portions of respondents showed a lack of preference.

Figure 1 shows the reasons why respondents wanted to taste foreign food. Most respondents who were neophilic (89%) loved the experience of tasting new food and experiencing new cultures ($p=0.017$), following trends and their friends ($p=0.047$), and because it was cheap ($p=0.042$). Meanwhile, Figure 2 displays that the majority of neophobic respondents avoided tasting new food because of the uncertainty regarding whether the food was halal or not ($p=0.046$) and weird taste ($p=0.020$).

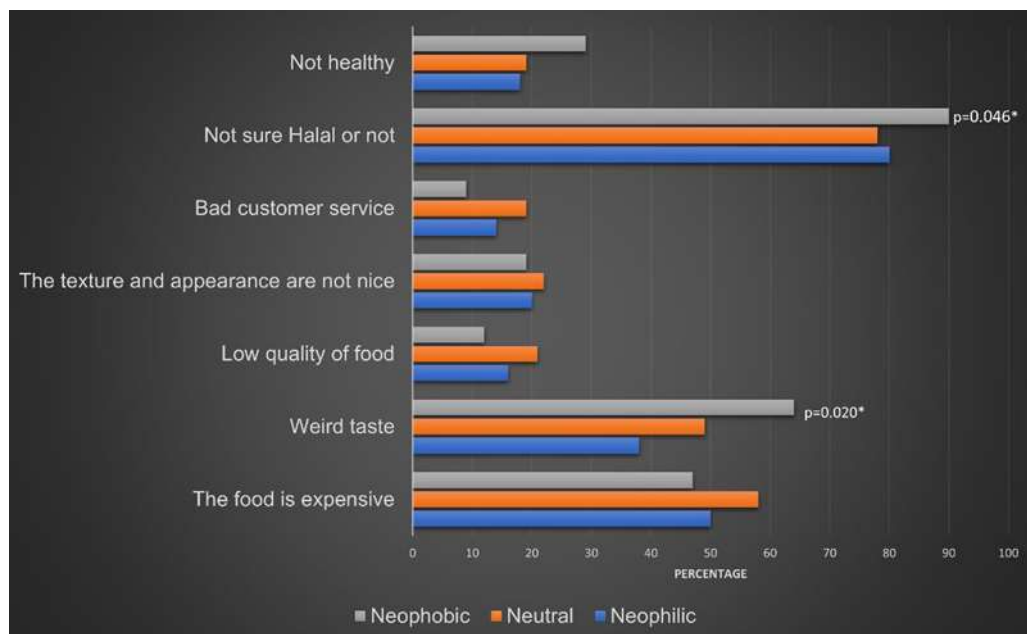


Fig. 2: Reasons to avoid foreign foods

5.0 Discussion

The focus of this cross-sectional study was to assess food neophobia in all kinds of generations, as well as the association between the three groups of neophobic, neutral, and neophilic. The study also aimed to explore how these groups correlate with reasons for food neophobic behaviour, such as avoiding foreign food. The study found that 71.4% of respondents were neutral, while 14.5% were neophobic, and the rest 14% were neophilic. The food neophobia score was highest among generation Y, generation X, and baby boomers, compared to generation Z, who mostly tended to be neophilic and enjoyed trying new foreign food. Having neutral customers, compared to customers who are food-neophobic or food-neophilic, can bring several benefits in terms of food choices. Incorporating the perspectives of neutral customers ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the overall market and enables businesses to make informed decisions that appeal to a wider range of consumers. The halal market is no longer limited to Muslim consumers. In fact, consumers tend to look for halal food since halal has even become a sign of quality, integrity, and cleanliness (Rejeb et al., 2021). It represents a more humane and environmentally friendly approach to production. Neutral people are becoming more aware of halal consciousness, halal certification, and the positive impact of halal brands on Muslims.

Furthermore, most of the respondents who had tried foreign food were neophilic, whereas those who had not were more likely to be neophobic. The table shows that most respondents did not exhibit neophobia towards Thai or Chinese food. This is likely due to the fact that Malaysian cuisine also uses similar ingredients, such as herbs and spices, to enhance the aroma, which is similar to Thai food that utilizes fresh herbs and spices like lemongrass, mint, galangal, lime, and chili (Tedesco, 2021). Therefore, the similarity between Malaysian and Thai cuisine makes respondents feel more comfortable with the food, and there are many Thai-owned restaurants due to the demand for Thai food in Malaysia. In addition, respondents did not exhibit neophobia towards Chinese food because Malaysia is a multi-racial country, where Malay food is known for its rich herbs and spiciness, while Chinese food is known for its freshness and lighter tastes, such as steamed food, soup, and Cantonese cuisine (Lim, 2022). Since Malaysia is home to many races, Chinese food is not considered foreign to them.

Our results show that neophilic individuals enjoy trying foreign food because it gives them the opportunity to experience new food and culture. Foreign food is mostly from other countries, allowing them to taste other country's cuisines, even if they have not yet visited those countries. In addition, neophilic individuals enjoy trying new foods to follow trends and friends. Social media is an excellent platform for people to stay updated, making it easier for them to know what popular and trendy foreign food to try. On the other hand, the table also shows that many neophobic individuals tend to avoid foreign food due to its weird taste. Foreign food is something new, and since it is not part of their cuisine, it may taste a little weird. From the previous article, the reason why neophobic fear to taste new food is because they have a fear of a food based on its unfamiliar or unusual sensory properties, such as appearance, texture, or smell (Child Feeding Guide, 2017).

Furthermore, neophobic individuals tend to avoid foreign food because they are not sure if it is halal or not. The importance of the halal status in foreign food is very significant today, not just for religious reasons, but also for the hygiene of the food. According to a previous article, the appeal of Halal-certified brands lies in their adherence to consumer values, convenient avoidance of pork and alcohol, overlap with other attractive features, and assurance of safety, purity, and quality of products not only for Muslim consumers but also for non-Muslim consumers (Islamic Services of America, 2021). Moreover, previous studies show that halal-certified food is safer and of higher quality than other options. Hence, it is crucial for people to be aware of the halal status of foreign food, especially if the halal logo is verified by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). Although there are many halal logos around the world, only 46 countries with 84 halal certificate bodies are verified by JAKIM in Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, 2020). Therefore, neophobic individuals need to be detail-oriented and choose their food carefully.

Generally, there are no significant health disadvantages associated with neophobia, unless individuals are excessively neophobic and actively avoid a variety of foods. In such cases, they may be at risk of nutrient deficiencies, which can lead to health consequences. Additionally, neophobic individuals may experience reduced meal enjoyment due to their limited food choices, as variety in food can enhance the overall dining experience. Moreover, enjoying a diverse range of foods can promote the production of your body's feel-good chemicals, such as serotonin and dopamine.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The presence of food neophobia can have a significant impact on the consumption of halal food, particularly when it comes to the recognition of halal logos. Food neophobic individuals, who experience a fear or aversion towards new or unfamiliar foods, tend to be more cautious about the food they consume. For these individuals, the presence of a halal logo on a product provides reassurance and helps alleviate concerns regarding the halal status of the food. It signifies that the food does not contain any haram (forbidden) ingredients or substances and has undergone a halal certification process.

Meanwhile, neophilic individuals exhibit a strong inclination towards tasting foreign foods due to their curiosity, openness to new experiences, and desire to explore diverse cultures. They actively seek out new culinary encounters driven by trends, cultural influences, social connections, and affordable options. Their adventurous nature and willingness to embrace novelty add vibrancy and excitement to their gastronomic journeys. By venturing beyond familiar culinary boundaries, neophilic individuals expand their horizons, foster connections with different communities, and stay attuned to the ever-evolving world of food.

Understanding the impact of factors such as food neophobia and neophilic tendencies on the consumption of halal food can provide valuable insights for various stakeholders. Researchers and scholars can delve into areas that require further investigation, such as the effects of food neophobia and neophilic behaviors on the acceptance and perception of halal food among different demographics. This can contribute to a deeper understanding of consumer motivations and aid in the development of targeted marketing strategies, product innovations, and culinary experiences that cater to diverse preferences and dietary requirements. Moreover, individuals interested in halal food can benefit from being aware of how their own neophobic or neophilic tendencies may influence their choices, allowing them to make more informed decisions and explore new culinary horizons.

While the study offers valuable insights, it has several limitations worth noting. Its cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single time point, presents challenges in establishing causality and tracking changes in attitudes and behaviors over time. Conducting longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive perspective. The sample size of 399 participants, while sufficient for many analyses, may limit the ability to draw highly detailed conclusions, especially when examining subgroups within the generations. Furthermore, as the study primarily focuses on generational groups in Malaysia, its findings may not be entirely generalizable to other regions or countries with distinct cultural and culinary contexts. For future research, researchers can conduct qualitative research studies to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between foreign food and food neophobia.

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Paper Contribution to related Field of Study

This paper makes a valuable contribution to the field of food neophobia and halal studies by shedding light on the intersection of these two areas. By examining the impact of food neophobia on the intake of halal food and the significance of halal logos for individuals with food neophobia, this research provides insights into the complex dynamics between psychological factors and dietary choices. The

findings underscore the importance of considering individual differences, such as food neophobia, when studying consumer behavior and preferences within the context of halal food. This paper expands our understanding of how food neophobia influences the acceptance and consumption of halal food, thereby informing scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in developing strategies to promote halal food and cater to the needs of individuals with varying levels of neophobia. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the perception, choice, and consumption of halal food, facilitating the development of tailored approaches to meet the diverse dietary requirements and preferences of consumers.

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