

How Can Healthy Meal Kits Look Attractive to Consumers?

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to analyze the importance of customers' selection attributes for meal kits, which is rapidly increasing in the home meal replacement food market, and empirically analyze the effect of food selection attributes on consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention toward meal kits. Research design, data, and methodology: Based on the results of previous research, factors that customers consider the most when purchasing a meal kit are nutritional components, ingredients, hygiene, taste, and price. The empirical analysis is conducted by using structural equation modeling to determine the extent that customer selection attributes for meal kits affect customer satisfaction and repurchase intention. The survey is conducted online from January 1 to March 15, 2022, and 282 valid samples are used for the analysis. Results: The result of the analysis confirms that nutritional components, hygiene, taste, and price have a statistically significant effect on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention. However, the effect of food ingredients on customer satisfaction and repurchase intention is rejected because no statistically significant results are obtained. Conclusions: As an empirical analysis of the importance of customer selection attributes of meal kits, this study has meaningful implications for related industries and business-to-business operators and provides basic data for the strategic development of related industries.

Keywords: Meal Kit, Selection Attributes, Nutritional Components, Hygiene, Ingredients.

JEL Classification Code: L66, D11, D12.

1. Introduction

In the post-COVID-19 era, the number of meals prepared at home has increased rapidly, but the number of meals in the traditional sense of "home-cooked," that is, by going to the grocery store and selecting ingredients is decreasing. In addition, the perception that a proper "Korean table setting" must be filled with rice, soup, and side dishes has been held for a long time. Currently, delivery food, meal kit, packaged food, and various home meal replacements (HMRs) are occupying the table. After analyzing 90,000 diets and 260,000 cooking methods and menus of 4,700 people, the

CJ CheilJedang found that the keywords of the 2021 food culture trend were "All day meal," "Beyond eat," and "Cooking by MZ". The generation that has increased the number of times they cook at home is the MZ generation, and it is predicted that the MZ generation will receive more love from their cohorts who can prepare their own food at home. As the consumption of the MZ generation accounts for 34% of that of the total population, the food industry is paying attention to it. The MZ generation is familiar with information technology, enjoys using social networking service (SNS), and has a strong desire to express themselves, so it is necessary to approach it in terms of consumer "value."

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(Lee & Kim, 2021). Recently, in the food and dining market, the MZ generation's unique values and lifestyles have formed a new trend, and interest in the MZ generation, who is emerging as a next-generation consumer leader, is increasing. According to Statistics Korea, in 2019, Generation Z, which is a group distinct from previous generations—Generation X and Baby Boomers—accounted for 33.7% of the total population in Korea. They are called digital natives and are emerging as a new central axis of consumption. In a recent trend study, it was found that consumers' desire to express their beliefs and values through online communication, including SNS, is increasing the eating-out trend. This characteristic is particularly conspicuous in the MZ generation because its values and consumption characteristics are different from those of previous generations due to various external environmental factors. The MZ generation is sensitive to environmental issues because they experience the environment, such as global warming, climate change, environmental pollution, and the increase in fine dust, in their daily life and demonstrate a strong conscious consumption tendency to pursue ethical values (KPMG, 2019). With the recent COVID-19 outbreak, people are getting tired of eating outside and are starting to pay more attention to their health.

The result of a study conducted by the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation on the change in food purchase volume after the outbreak of COVID-19 among 275 consumers revealed that HMR increased by 64.7%. According to the Korea Rural Economic Research Institute, the size of the domestic meal kit market was only 10 billion won in 2017 but grew to 200 billion won in 2019, and it is expected to expand to 300 billion won in 2022. According to the food industry report, the COVID-19 pandemic has prolonged, and the meal kit market is growing rapidly (KREI, 2021). Among HMRs, a meal kit is a "fresh HMR" that must be eaten within three to four days of purchase, and according to the Korea Agro-fisheries and Food Trade Corporation, the meal kit market was worth 188.2 billion won last year, which is an increase of 85% from that of the previous year. In addition, it is expected to grow at an annual average of 31% by 2025, reaching 725.3 billion won. It is predicted that the size of the meal kit market, which was only 2 billion won in 2017, will grow 100 times in three years. According to the food industry, meal kits are evolving once again. This is because the demand for premium meal kits has surged as much as that for eating out. In addition, the number of people eating out has decreased because of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. Meal kit companies have collaborated with famous restaurants and chefs across the country and are selling hot meals. Restaurant meal replacement is in full swing because the ingredients of the menu used at restaurants are packaged and delivered. As the COVID-19 pandemic has prolonged, men in their 40s and

50s are actively participating in cooking; thus, the purchase of meal kits has increased significantly (Baek, 2021).

Currently, consumer interest worldwide, including Korea, is not limited to health, and the consumption value of food is changing to sustainability. In other words, in recent times, consumers' interest in eating out is eating healthy food. Home convenience food and meal kits have the advantage of being convenient, but they have not yet achieved consumer satisfaction regarding health. In addition, to satisfy the satisfaction of consumers who are more interested in health due to COVID-19, the restaurant industry is making various efforts to develop menus that focus on health. Therefore, recently, products such as healthy meal kits designed to satisfy consumer demand for health, taste, and convenience are gradually being made. As the healthy meal kit market is still in its early stage, this paper studies the effect of health food selection attributes on consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention toward meal kits and then derive the necessary factors for supplementing and improving healthy meal kits that are currently being developed. Previous study of meal kit researched the basic attributes such as price, variety, and quality among the customer selection attributes. However, this study aims to broaden the horizon of research by investigating the properties of healthy image meal kits in nutrition, ingredients, and hygiene etc., and provide basic data when the meal kit industries establish marketing strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Healthy Food

The quest for a healthy menu means that most modern people want to upgrade their health index from normal to healthy. Many people have fantasies about "healthy food" and are making various efforts, including exercise and diet control, to regulate their health status. This raises the following question: "What exactly is a healthy diet?" A healthy diet simply means a balanced diet. The way to practice a healthy diet that achieves a quantitative and qualitative balance of the various nutrients the body needs in a daily diet is possible only by eating a variety of foods (Kim et al., 2002). A healthy menu comprises low-fat, no salt, no sugar, and stamina food and can include low-fat fish and poultry (e.g., salmon and turkey), especially highprotein foods (Choi et al, 2001). It is a menu consisting of dishes of stamina food made for patients or people in need of health care and especially comprises high-protein foods, such as meat, fish, and asparagus. In the early 1990s, the focus was on researching consumer reactions to menus, and from the mid-1990s, studies on menu engineering were

conducted along with analyses of the profitability and popularity of menus. In the 2000s, research on healthy food was gradually being conducted. Choi et al. (2020) conducted a study on factors affecting service satisfaction in Korean restaurants with a focus on healthy food, Kwak et al. (2021) conducted a study on the menu of medicinal dishes for the elderly.

In recent years, concerns about the health of consumers are increasing. Due to the intensification of health anxiety, consumers make product purchase decisions by considering various aspects of the product. In particular, as the culture of replacing one meal with convenience store food and eating out is established, concerns about nutritional imbalance and stimulating taste are increasing. Concerns about diseases and high-calorie diets naturally affect the selection of healthy foods (Newcombe et al., 2012), and these concerns naturally lead to healthy eating and preference for fresh foods (Na, 2016). HMR reduces consumers' domestic work time and enables them to have more leisure time. However, there is a strong perception that it is not good for health, and some consumers feel guilty about consuming it. Regarding the premium HMR meal kit, it includes the process of cooking it yourself using fresh food. Moreover, it provides consumers with healthy home-cooked meals that are as simple as the existing HMR (Hertz & Halkier, 2017). It allows consumers to have leisure time without feeling guilty.

2.2. Meal Kit

Meal kits are attracting attention as a new growth engine of the food industry in the post-COVID-19 era. "Meal kit" is a compound word of meal and kit (set), which is also called cooking box or recipe box. In 2017, a Korean Yakult company was the first to start the meal kit business. In addition, GS Retail's "Simply Cook," Market Kurly, and My Chef joined the meal kit business, and the full-fledged growth of the meal kit market began (Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 2019). According to the food industry, the meal kit market is expected to reach 40 billion won in 2021. This is more than double that of 2020. The meal kit market is expected to grow to about 700 billion won in 2024 because of an increase in one-to-twoperson households and the introduction of a 52-hour workweek. A survey of famous domestic meal kit brands revealed that only two brands have vegetarian meal kits "It's" On" and "Presage." In addition, Simply Cook, My Chef, and Cookit do not sell vegetarian meal kits separately. The result of a comprehensive examination indicates that most of the meal kits sold in Korea mainly consists of meat. In addition, traditional market vendors are also jumping into the meal kit market, which was centered on large food companies. This is a self-help measure chosen by small merchants when store operations were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. A distribution industry official said, "As more consumers are familiar with meal kits, small merchants are also joining the meal kit market." Now, some customers repurchase meal kits after purchasing them for the first time. It seems that consumers are very interested in meal kits. Due to this, the Korea Rural Economic Research Institute predicted that the meal kit market will grow to 700 billion won in 2024.

The meal kit market in the United States (US) and Japan is experiencing steady growth. Regarding the US market, the market grew from 150.1 billion KRW in 2013 to 3.534 trillion KRW in 2018, recording an average annual growth rate of 88%. (Ministry of Agriculture & Food and Rural Affairs, 2017). In the US, products such as vegetarian, gluten-free, and organic baby food and therapeutic food suitable for various targets and diets are sold in response to various consumer needs. As of September 2017, Blue Apron, Hello Fresh, and Home Chef were the representative delivery companies for the US meal kit market. As of September 2017, Blue Apron maintained the lead with a 40.3% market share. Hello Fresh accounted for 28.4%, and Home Chef accounted for 10.5%. The three brands prepare a different menu each week, and they have a customized system that allows consumers to choose the menu they prefer according to their taste. It is reported that the Japanese market for meal kits started from 117.2 billion won in 2013 and grew to 885.9 billion won in 2018. As the size of the Japanese meal kit market grows, the customer base is segmented, and products targeting specific customers, such as single-person households, kids, and the elderly, are appearing one after another.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Model

The following hypotheses were established based on previous studies to investigate the relationship between consumer selection attributes of healthy meal kits on satisfaction and repurchase intention, and a qualitative study was conducted to verify the established research hypothesis. The hypothesis and research model are as follows.

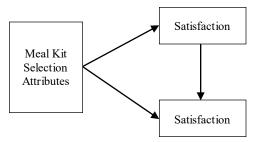


Figure 1: Research Model

3.2. Hypotheses Setting

As health food purchasing factors affect the satisfaction and repurchase of meal kits, the purchasing factors of healthy food are established following previous studies. According to Lee and Um (2004), eating-out consumers have a potential desire for a healthy menu, and their interest in health is increasing. According to Kim et al. (2005), nutritional components are established by providing balanced nutrition of food and strengthening the nutritional components of ingredients. In addition, according to Yang et al. (2019), when purchasing a meal kit, consumers evaluate the overall quality of the product such as sanitation, taste, price, and nutrition (Cha & Wang, 2020; Kwak & Cha, 2021).

Looking at recent studies on the selection properties of milk kits, price, convenience, diversity (Kim & Kim, 2021), variety, quality, convenience, price (Chung, & Kim, 2020), price (Yang et al., 2019), safety, convenience, taste, quality (Oh & Hong, 2019), taste, quality, simplicity, price, and packaging type (Choi et al., 2020), hygiene factor, packaging factor, convenience (Song, 2020) and others have been verified to have an effect on consumer satisfaction. Additionally, the selection attributes of the 'healthy meal kit' in this study were selected through FGI of experts in the relevant field and by referring to reports of specialized agencies.

Based on previous studies, we propose that nutritional components, food ingredients, hygiene, taste, and price, which are the purchasing factors of healthy food and meal kits, would affect satisfaction and repurchase of meal kits (Cha & Seo, 2019). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: The nutritional components of a meal kit have a positive effect on satisfaction.

H1b: The ingredients of a meal kit have a positive effect on satisfaction.

H1c: The safety of a meal kit has a positive effect on satisfaction.

H1d: The taste of a meal kit has a positive effect on satisfaction.

H1e: The price of a meal kit has a positive effect on satisfaction.

H2a: The nutritional components of a meal kit have a positive effect on repurchase intention.

H2b: The ingredients of a meal kit have a positive effect on repurchase intention.

H2c: The safety of a meal kit has a positive effect on repurchase intention.

H2d: The taste of a meal kit has a positive effect on repurchase intention.

H2e: The price of a meal kit has a positive effect on

repurchase intention.

H3: Satisfaction with a meal kit has a positive effect on repurchase intention.

3.3. Sample and Data Collection

The survey for the study consisted of questions about demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, number of household members, occupation, and region of residence, and nutrition. It consisted of items on food ingredients, safety, taste, price, satisfaction, and repurchase intention. Each measurement item in the survey was measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree), and the demographic characteristics were measured on nominal and rank scales. In this study, the questions of the survey were selected to suit people who can and are expected to purchase meal kits and can purchase them anywhere due to the nature of meal kits. The survey period is from January 1, 2022 to March 15, 2022, and the survey was conducted using an online questionnaire, with 282 people responding to the survey.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of Sample

Table 1 lists the characteristics of the sample of this study. The gender percentage is 89 (32%) for men and 193 (68%) for women, and the reason why female participants are about twice as high as male participants is that women purchase various meal kits more than men. Regarding the age distribution, 23 are 10–19 years (8.2%); 153 are 20–29 years (54.3%); 51 are 30–39 years (18.1%); 10 are 40–49 years (3.5%); 39 are 50–59 years (13.8%), and 6 are over 60 years (2.1%).

As for the type of housing, three- or four-person households are the most, with 169 people (59.9%), and single-person households are 77 people (27.3%), with three- or four- and single-person households accounting for more than 80% of the total housing type. By occupation, 116 are students (41.1%), and 60 are office workers (21.3%). As for residential areas, 89 people (31.6%) were in Seoul, and 80 (28.4%) were in five provinces (Gyeonggi-do, Gangwon-do, Chungcheong-do, Jeolla-do, and Gyeongsang-do). Regarding the average number of meals per day, 131 (46.5%) are three times, and 128 (45.4%) are 2 times, indicating that the average number of meals is two to three times.

Table 1: Demographic Traits Analysis

	Demographic	No. of	Percentage	
Item	traits	sample(per)	(%)	
0 1	Male	89	31.6	
Gender	Female	193	68.4	
	10's	23	8.2	
	20's	153	54.3	
۸۵۵	30;'s	51	18.1	
Age	40;'s	10	3.5	
	50's	39	13.8	
	60's 6		2.1	
	single-person household	77	27.3	
The number	A two-person household.		5.0	
of households	3 or 4 people households.	169	59.9	
	A household with 5 or more members.	22	7.8	
	Student	116	41.1	
	Office worker	60	21.3	
	Administrative position	7	2.5	
Occupation	Specialized job	42	14.9	
'	Service/sales position	8	2.8	
	Homemaker	36	12.8	
	Etc. 13		4.6	
	Seoul	89	31.6	
Occupied area	Seoul metropolitan area/new city.	60	21.3	
	Six metropolitan cities.	53	18.8	
	Eight provinces (-do)	80	28.4	
The average	One time	21	7.4	
number of	Two times	128	45.4	
eating	Three times	131	46.5	
societies.	Four times	2	0.7	

4.2. Result of Analysis

Concentrated validity can be evaluated using factor loading and average variance extracted (AVE), which indicates the degree of correlation of a measured variable with respect to one latent variable. The standardized factor loading value should be 0.7 or higher, and as presented in Table 2, there is concentrated validity because all of them have a value of 0.7 or higher. The AVE value, which is the average of the squared values of the standardized factor loading values, is generally accepted as having a concentrated validity if it is 0.5 or higher. Table 2 confirms that there is a concentrated validity because all of them have a value of 0.5 or more.

Table 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Result

Variables	Measure	Standardized Regression Coefficient	CR	AVE
Nutritional	Nut01	0.883		0.625
	Nut02	0.875	0.869	
rvatitional	Nut03	0.808	0.003	
	Nut04	0.709		
	Ing01	0.920		0.548
Ingredient	Ing02	0.983	0.826	
lingredient	Ing03	0.807	0.020	
	Ing04	0.662		
	Hyg01	0.758		0.650
Hygiene	Hyg02	0.933	0.880	
nygierie	Hyg03	0.964	0.000	
	Hyg04	0.753		
	Tas01	0.697		0.625
Taste	Tas02	0.883	0.868	
laste	Tas03	0.919		
	Tas04	0.732		
	Pri01	0.752		0.501
Price	Pri02	0.434	0.789	
Price	Pri03	0.928	0.769	
	Pri04	0.931		
	Sat01	0.879		0.752
Satisfaction	Sat02	0.855	0.000	
	Sat03	0.922	0.923	
	Sat04	0.910		
	Rep01	0.957		-
Popurobasa	Rep02	0.967	0.882	0.655
Repurchase	Rep03	0.756	0.002	0.000
	Rep04	0.766		

Discriminant validity indicates how different each measured variable is from other latent variables, indicating that one latent variable is separated from another. Table 3 confirms discriminant validity, that is, the correlation between each latent variable is greater than the square root of the AVE value, and all the square root of AVE values are greater than the correlation coefficient.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity through Correlation Analysis

Variab les	Tast e	Nutr ition al	Ingr edie nt	Hygi ene	Pric e	Sati sfac tion	Rep urch ase
Taste	0.77						
Nutriti onal	0.45	0.81					
Ingred ient	0.26	0.72	0.89				
Hygie ne	0.27	0.23	0.52	0.70			
Price	0.40	0.32	0.51	0.33	0.75		
Satisf action	0.31	0.41	0.41	0.37	0.42	0.82	
Repur chase	0.42	0.21	0.48	0.39	0.31	0.44	0.79

The diagonal values shown are square root of AVE.

Table 4 presents the relationship between repurchase intention and consumer satisfaction with each selection attribute. It is found that among the five factors, nutritional components, hygiene, taste, and price affect both repurchase intention and consumer satisfaction.

In detail, the relationship of nutritional components with repurchase intention is very significant because the *p*-value is lower than 0.001, and hygiene, taste, and price are significant because the *p*-value is lower than 0.05, which can be explained as having a positive effect on repurchase intention. On the one hand, it is found that food ingredients do not have a positive effect on repurchase intention.

Regarding consumer satisfaction, nutritional components and hygiene are very significant because the *p*-value is lower

than 0.001, and price and taste are significant because the *p*-value is lower than 0.05, which can be explained as having a positive effect on satisfaction. On the other hand, it is found that food ingredients do not have a positive effect on satisfaction. In other words, nutritional components, hygiene, taste, and price of meal kits have a great influence on consumers' repurchase intention and satisfaction, whereas food ingredients do not have a significant influence on consumers' repurchase intention. Among the five factors, nutritional components have the greatest influence.

Finally, we find that satisfaction influences repurchase intention, and the *p*-value is significantly lower than 0.001, which can be considered significant.

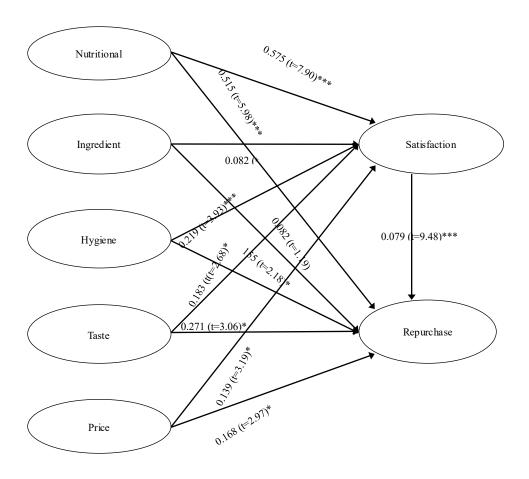


Figure 2: Results of Research Hypothesis

Hyp othe	Paths	Estim ate	<i>t</i> - value	<i>p</i> - value	Results
sis					
H1a	Nutritional -> Satisfaction	0.575	7.90	***	Support
H1b	Ingredient -> Satisfaction	0.082	1.54	.122	Reject
H1c	Hygiene -> Satisfaction	0.219	3.93	***	Support
H1d	Taste -> Satisfaction	0.183	2.68	*	Support
H1e	Price -> Satisfaction	0.139	3.19	*	Support
H2a	Nutritional -> Repurchase	0.515	5.97	***	Support
H2b	Ingredient -> Repurchase	0.082	1.19	.233	Reject
H2c	Hygiene -> Repurchase	0.155	2.18	*	Support
H2d	Taste -> Repurchase	0.271	3.06	*	Support
H2e	Price -> Repurchase	0.168	2.97	*	Support
H3	Satisfaction -> Repurchase	0.790	9.48	***	Support

^{*} p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

5. Conclusion and Implications

Apart from providing simple meals, the meal kit market, which has grown rapidly in recent years and will continue to grow, is trying to provide healthy meals to consumers. Consumers have also begun to pursue simple and healthy meals as they have become more interested in their health due to COVID-19. Many relevant studies have focused on meal kits, and most studies on healthy diets, patient diets, or simple healthy meals are related to salads. Recently, demand for healthy food is increasing, and as a meal kit is an established means of eating out, consumers' demand for healthy meal kits has increased. In recent times, healthy meal kits have been developed one after another, so this study focuses on healthy meal kits. It investigates the effect of healthy food selection attributes on consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention toward meal kits. The selection attributes of healthy food are classified into fivenutritional components, food ingredients, hygiene, taste, and price. Furthermore, whether these attributes affect consumer satisfaction and repurchase intentions are analyzed. The study results are as follows.

First, it is found that nutritional components, hygiene, taste, and price affect consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention toward meal kits. Among them, nutritional components have the greatest influence. This result is consistent with that of Lee and Um (2004), Kim et al. (2005),

and Yang et al. (2019). The results reveal that consumers are interested in healthy meals, and as the questionnaire contains other attributes of healthy food, it can be concluded that consumers are more concerned about health, so they pay more attention to the nutritional components of food than taste. These results seem to indicate that consumers are starting to pay more attention to their health after COVID-19. This is different from the previous studies (Kim & Kim, 2021; Chung & Kim, 2020; Yang et al., 2019; Oh & Hong, 2019; Choi et al., 2020; Song, 2020) in the early stage of the meal kit, which researched selection attributes by limiting only price, variety, quality, and convenience etc. Therefore, this study found important implications through the research that consumers started looking for healthy meal kits beyond price or quality after COVID-19.

Second, it is found that food ingredients do not affect consumer satisfaction and repurchase intention toward meal kits. This is due to consumers' trust in the ingredients of meal kits. Meal kits are advertised as providing safe and prepared ingredients to consumers, and it is considered that consumers who have purchased meal kits perceive that the ingredients are not different from other food ingredient.

With economic development and improvement of national standards, consumers no longer distrust and differentiate the ingredients of the meal kit. Therefore, it is considered that the non-differentiated food ingredients of the meal kit are no longer a concern of consumers. Therefore, it is recommended that the meal kit manufacturing companies or sales companies refer to the results of the study.

The results reveal that the most important thing to consider in a healthy meal kit is the nutritional components. Recently, consumers' interest in health is increasing. A meal kit of balanced nutrition will be able to satisfy the needs of consumers. Of course, it is important to provide consumers with a healthy meal kit that satisfies both taste and nutrition without missing out on the taste, which is the top priority of a meal kit.

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