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Comparative Perceptions of Korean Fine Dining: A Big Data Analysis of Michelin-Starred Restaurants in and outside the USA

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Abstract

In today's digital era, millions of diners share their experiences online, creating vast datasets that reveal how consumers perceive global cuisines. This study applies big data text-mining techniques to compare perceptions of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located in and outside the United States. Using 9,535 Google Maps reviews from 17 restaurants collected through Outscraper, qualitative analysis was performed using KH Coder to identify high-frequency keywords and co-occurrence networks. The comparative results revealed clear regional distinctions. Reviews from U.S.-based restaurants emphasized service quality, Michelin prestige, and memorable experiences, reflecting expectations shaped by Western fine-dining culture. In contrast, reviews from restaurants outside the U.S. highlighted authentic flavor, Korean identity, and sensory dining experiences, demonstrating greater cultural curiosity and appreciation for culinary authenticity. These findings indicate that regional contexts significantly shape diners' cognitive and emotional framing of K-Food, blending dimensions of prestige, authenticity, and experience in unique ways. By visualizing these linguistic and semantic differences, this study expands understanding of cross-cultural gastronomy and online consumer behavior. The results offer theoretical and managerial implications for Korean fine-dining restaurants seeking to adapt branding and communication strategies across diverse global markets.

Keywords: K-Food; Michelin-Starred Restaurants; Global Gastronomy; Online Reviews; Big Data Analysis

1. Introduction

As According to the 2024 Overseas Korean Food Consumer Survey by the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation, 65.5% of consumers worldwide reported being aware of Korean cuisine, with recognition reaching 87.0% across 18 major global cities including New York, London, Paris, Singapore, and Toronto (Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation, 2024). Moreover, over 80% of respondents stated that they had experienced Korean food at least once, signifying that K-Food has evolved from a regional cuisine into a globally appreciated gastronomic phenomenon. This surge in international popularity has been fueled by the growing influence of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), through which K-pop, K-dramas, and digital media have heightened the visibility and desirability of Korean culture worldwide (Jin & Yoon, 2016). As a result, Korean cuisine now occupies a distinctive position within global gastronomy, one that combines authentic cultural heritage with modern culinary innovation.

In parallel with this global rise, the Michelin Guide's recognition of Korean restaurants represents an important symbol of international validation. Currently, there are 17 Michelin-starred Korean restaurants abroad, with the majority concentrated in major U.S. cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Miami, alongside others in Singapore and Hong Kong (Micheline Guide, 2025). These restaurants have become cultural ambassadors, redefining Korean food within the framework of fine dining. However, while the Michelin recognition affirms the artistic and technical excellence of Korean chefs, it also raises a compelling question: Do global diners perceive Korean fine dining in the same way across different regions? Cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping diners' expectations and evaluations what American customers value as creativity and prestige may differ from what Asian or European diners interpret as authenticity and cultural connection.

Despite the growing academic attention to K-Food's globalization, few studies have explored how regional and cultural differences influence diners' perceptions of Korean fine dining (Ingerson & Kim, 2016). Most existing research has focused on marketing strategies, cultural branding, or overall satisfaction without distinguishing between regional consumer perspectives (Ilias, 2025).

In this study, Korean food refers to the broad spectrum of cuisine rooted in Korean culinary traditions, encompassing both traditional and modern reinterpretations. Korean fine dining specifically denotes high-end gastronomic experiences that reinterpret Korean cuisine through refined techniques, artistic presentation, and global culinary standards. The term gastronomy is used more broadly to encompass cultural, aesthetic, and experiential dimensions of dining, extending beyond the functional act of eating. These definitions provide conceptual clarity and facilitate interpretation of the discussions on prestige, authenticity, and cultural identity in the subsequent sections.

To address this gap, this study conducts a comparative big data analysis of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants in and outside the United States. Using 9,535 online reviews collected from Google Maps, text-mining and co-occurrence network analyses were performed through KH Coder to uncover semantic patterns and experiential themes. By comparing the linguistic and emotional dimensions of online reviews across regions, this study aims to illuminate how global diners differently conceptualize K-Food as a symbol of prestige, authenticity, and cultural experience, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural gastronomy and consumer behavior in the digital era.

This study is significant in that it explores how regional and cultural contexts shape global diners' perceptions of Korean fine dining, an area that remains underexplored despite the growing global popularity of K-Food. By applying a big data text-mining approach to Michelin-starred Korean restaurants, this research contributes to cross-cultural gastronomy studies and provides practical insights for the global restaurant industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. K-Food and the Globalization of Fine Dining

Authors The globalization of Korean cuisine has accelerated alongside the broader expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), encompassing K-pop, dramas, fashion, and beauty. These cultural exports have significantly enhanced global curiosity toward Korean food and reshaped its international image (Lee & Zhang, 2021). Once regarded

primarily as comfort or street food, Korean cuisine has evolved into a refined expression of artistry, health, and storytelling. Popular dishes such as bulgogi, bibimbap, and samgyeopsal have transitioned from casual ethnic offerings to globally recognized culinary icons (Kwon et al., 2023). This evolution reflects not only changing consumption patterns but also strategic government initiatives and media representations that position K-Food as a key component of cultural diplomacy (Yang et al., 2022)

Recent studies also emphasize the role of sustainability and segmentation in supporting Korea's culinary globalization, highlighting how targeted market strategies contribute to the international competitiveness of cultural and gastronomic products (Cha et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024)

The rise of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants marks an important milestone in this transformation. Receiving a Michelin star is widely interpreted as international recognition of culinary excellence and authenticity (Chiang & Guo, 2021) In particular, restaurants such as Jungsik and Atomix in New York have redefined Korean cuisine through modern plating, innovative tasting menus, and cross-cultural techniques. Their success demonstrates that Korean gastronomy has moved beyond its traditional comfort-food image to become part of the global fine-dining landscape. However, as K-Food expands into different regions, the interpretation and appreciation of Korean fine dining may vary across cultural contexts, necessitating comparative inquiry.

2.2. Regional and Cross-Cultural Perceptions in Gastronomy

The Food perception is shaped not only by taste but also by cultural expectations, symbolic meaning, and experiential context. Prior research in cross-cultural hospitality indicates that Western diners often evaluate fine-dining experiences through dimensions such as service quality, consistency, and brand prestige (Jin et al., 2012), whereas Asian and European diners tend to emphasize authenticity, storytelling, and sensory connection (Altunel & Erkurt, 2015). These cultural differences suggest that the same culinary product such as a Korean tasting menu can elicit diverse emotional and cognitive responses depending on diners' cultural orientation.

The United States occupies a unique position as both a hub of gastronomic innovation and a gatekeeper of culinary prestige. Within this context, Korean fine dining in the U.S. is often interpreted through Western evaluative frameworks emphasizing professionalism, Michelin recognition, and experiential satisfaction. By contrast, in other regions particularly Asia and Europe, K-Food is more closely associated with cultural authenticity, discovery, and identity expression (Chung et al., 2016). Such variations highlight how cultural values such as individualism versus collectivism and hedonic versus symbolic consumption shape the linguistic and emotional framing of online reviews. Yet, despite growing scholarly interest in cross-cultural dining experiences, comparative studies focusing specifically on regional differences in perceptions of Korean fine dining remain limited. Addressing this gap provides deeper insight into how global diners negotiate meaning and value within the same culinary context.

2.3. Big Data and Text-Mining Approaches in Gastronomy Research

Consumers The proliferation of online review platforms has transformed the way researchers examine consumer behavior in hospitality and gastronomy. User-generated content offers real-time, experience-based data that captures both cognitive evaluations and affective expressions (Williady & Kim, 2023). Compared with traditional surveys, online reviews provide spontaneous and unbiased feedback, revealing how diners describe satisfaction, authenticity, and value through natural language. This makes text mining and sentiment analysis powerful tools for identifying emerging patterns and thematic structures in large datasets (Handani et al., 2022)

In the field of gastronomy, recent studies have successfully applied big data analytics to explore consumer experiences in Michelin-starred restaurants, uncovering how diners articulate quality, luxury, and emotional fulfillment (Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Rita et al., 2023). Techniques such as co-occurrence network analysis and correspondence mapping enable visualization of semantic relationships between keywords, allowing researchers to detect subtle variations in perception across regions or satisfaction levels. Building on these methodological advances, the present study applies KH Coder to analyze 9,535 reviews from 17 Michelin-starred Korean restaurants worldwide. By comparing reviews

from the United States with those from outside the United States, this research extends the scope of big-data gastronomy analysis to a cross-regional framework, illustrating how cultural context shapes linguistic patterns and emotional discourse in online dining reviews. Recent big-data tourism studies also demonstrate the growing integration of data-driven insights into cultural and hospitality research, validating the effectiveness of text mining for uncovering experience-based patterns (Lee et al., 2024)

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative big data approach using text-mining techniques to compare how diners perceive Korean fine dining in Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located inside and outside the United States. The research aimed to uncover regional differences in customer perceptions by analyzing linguistic patterns and keyword associations in online review texts.

The analysis proceeded in two main stages. In the first stage, online review data were collected from Michelin-starred Korean restaurants worldwide to capture authentic visitor experiences and opinions. In the second stage, a co-occurrence network analysis was conducted using KH Coder to visualize and interpret the semantic relationships among frequently mentioned words within the reviews. Separate co-occurrence analyses were performed for the U.S.-based restaurants and for those outside the U.S., allowing for a direct comparison of the thematic structures and emotional tones expressed in each region. By focusing on co-occurrence networks rather than quantitative modeling, this design emphasizes the qualitative richness of customer narratives and reveals how diners in different cultural contexts articulate their experiences of Korean fine dining.

3.2. Data Collection

This study collected Google Maps reviews of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located both inside and outside the United States as of 2024, based on the official listings of the Michelin Guide. The dataset included a total of 17 Korean restaurants that had been

awarded one or more Michelin stars. According to the 2024 Michelin Guide, there were 17 Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located outside Korea, 15 in the United States and only 2 in non-U.S. regions (Hong Kong and Singapore). Therefore, the “outside the U.S.” group also reflects the relatively small global presence of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants.

This study excluded restaurants located in Korea because the purpose was to analyze how global diners perceive K-Food through Korean fine-dining restaurants situated abroad. Thus, the sample composition corresponds to the actual geographic distribution of Korean fine-dining establishments recognized by the Michelin Guide. These restaurants represent the most globally recognized examples of Korean fine dining, including Jungsik, the first Korean restaurant to receive a Michelin star abroad in 2012 and later elevated to three stars, as well as other notable establishments such as Atomix, Cote, Jeju Noodle Bar, and Nae:um. The review data were collected from the time each restaurant received its Michelin star up to the year 2024.

For comparative purposes, the reviews were divided into two groups:

- (1) Inside the USA, consisting of restaurants located in cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Miami; and
- (2) Outside the USA, including restaurants located in Singapore and Hong Kong.

This classification allowed for the identification of regional differences in how diners describe their experiences with Korean fine dining. While numerical ratings provided a quantitative overview of satisfaction levels, the qualitative text data offered detailed insights into the linguistic and emotional dimensions of customer perceptions analyzed through co-occurrence network mapping.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis in this study was primarily qualitative, employing text-mining techniques to explore and compare customer perceptions of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located inside and outside the United States. The software KH Coder 3 was used to process and analyze online review data. KH Coder 3 is an open-source software that supports both quantitative and qualitative text analysis. It performs word-frequency, co-occurrence, and

cluster analyses while enabling the qualitative interpretation of semantic networks and contextual themes. In this study, KH Coder 3 was used to identify high-frequency words and visualize relationships among terms, helping reveal key experiential patterns in diners' perceptions of Korean fine dining across regions. During preprocessing, stop words and irrelevant terms were removed to ensure that only meaningful linguistic elements such as nouns and adjectives, were retained for analysis.

After text refinement, the software extracted the top 60 most frequently occurring words, which served as the foundation for further analysis. A co-occurrence network analysis was then performed to visualize the semantic relationships among these high-frequency words and to identify clusters of terms with similar contextual meanings. Separate network maps were generated for reviews written about restaurants in the USA and those outside the USA, allowing for direct comparison of thematic patterns and customer emphasis across regions.

In addition, correspondence analysis was applied to examine how the frequency and association of specific keywords differed between the two groups of restaurants. This comparative approach enabled the identification of key elements that shaped customer satisfaction and perception within each cultural context. Overall, KH Coder provided a systematic framework for transforming large-scale, unstructured text data into interpretable semantic patterns, offering valuable insights into regional differences in the global perception of Korean fine dining.

Table 1. Frequency of top keywords for Korean Restaurants Abroad Awarded Michelin Stars

Rank	word	freq	Rank	word	freq
1	food	4739	31	table	1139
2	experience	3487	32	feel	1099
3	service	3192	33	MICHELIN	1012
4	dish	2946	34	everything	953
5	great	2589	35	reservation	946
6	korean	2548	36	excellent	938
7	restaurant	2537	37	COTE	926
8	good	2463	38	love	906
9	amazing	2107	39	server	854

10	go	1807	40	he	853
11	come	1800	41	tasting	830
12	place	1756	42	even	822
13	time	1667	43	order	817
14	make	1661	44	quality	816
15	meat	1653	45	drink	813
16	best	1606	46	steak	809
17	meal	1526	47	take	792
18	recommend	1511	48	eat	788
19	delicious	1421	49	enjoy	776
20	here	1375	50	price	770
21	really	1369	51	wine	766
22	staff	1336	52	nice	754
23	course	1234	53	atmosphere	752
24	try	1227	54	serve	745
25	dining	1211	55	dinner	731
26	back	1209	56	say	731
27	well	1194	57	think	711
28	definitely	1176	58	dessert	695
29	flavor	1171	59	ever	676
30	star	1155	60	special	676

4. Results

4.1. Frequency Analysis

In A total of 9,535 online reviews were analyzed, revealing an overall average satisfaction rating of 4.5 out of 5, which reflects a consistently high level of customer satisfaction across all restaurants. Table 2 summarizes the Michelin-starred Korean restaurants included in the dataset as of 2024, presenting the number of Google Maps reviews collected for each establishment along with their corresponding average rating z-scores.

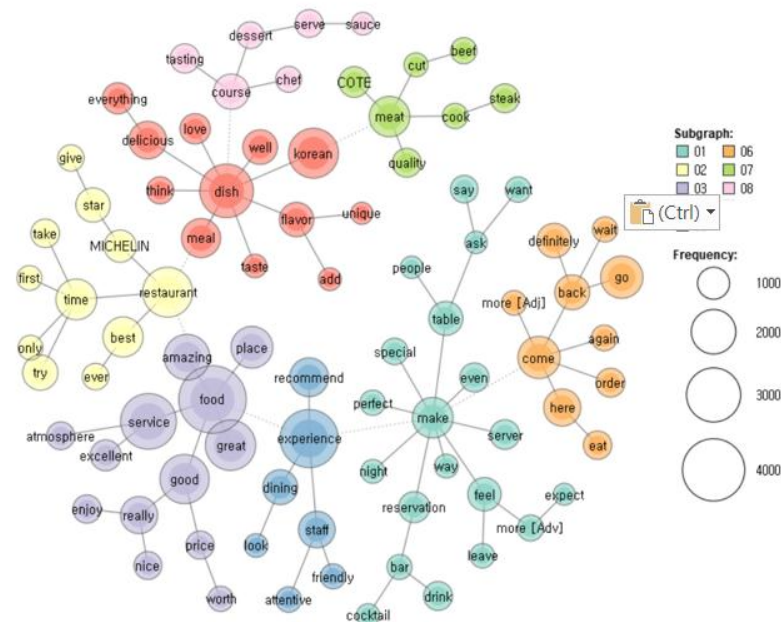
The frequency analysis was conducted as the initial step in the text-mining process to provide data-driven, exploratory insights into the most frequently mentioned themes and

keywords within customer reviews. Using KH Coder, large volumes of review data were refined and visualized efficiently, forming the foundation for the subsequent co-occurrence analysis.

Table 1 presents the top 60 most frequently occurring words extracted from 9,535 Google Maps reviews of 17 Michelin-starred Korean restaurants. The most common keywords such as food, experience, service, dish, and Korea, highlight diners' primary focus on cuisine quality and the overall dining experience. Terms like amazing, delicious, flavor, and recommend reflect strong positive emotional expressions, demonstrating customers' admiration for taste and presentation.

The frequent appearance of words such as Michelin, star, fine, and chef also underscores the perceived prestige and authenticity associated with these restaurants' Michelin recognition. Overall, the high-frequency word patterns indicate that reviewers consistently emphasize both tangible elements (food, service, ambiance) and intangible experiences (emotion, authenticity, cultural identity), offering a nuanced understanding of how diners perceive Korean fine dining within different regional contexts.

After identifying the top 60 most frequently used words, a word cloud was generated using Voyant Tools to visually represent their relative frequencies within customer reviews. In this visualization, the size of each word corresponds to its frequency, offering an intuitive overview of the terms most prominently featured in customers' written feedback. The word cloud provides an at-a-glance understanding of how diners describe their experiences at Michelin-starred Korean restaurants. Its main purpose is to highlight dominant themes and recurrent expressions that capture the essence of customer perceptions. Frequently appearing terms such as food, service, experience, great, and Korean illustrate the primary satisfaction drivers and experiential dimensions that shape the overall image of Korean fine dining across different regions.



The co-occurrence network analysis reveals distinct thematic orientations in consumer reviews of Michelin-starred restaurants located within and outside the United States. The “USA” cluster emphasizes experiential and service-related attributes such as service, staff, recommend, Michelin (Liu & Jang, 2009), and star indicating that American diners prioritize reputation, recognition, and the overall quality of hospitality. In contrast, the “Outside USA” cluster centers on sensory and culinary-specific elements, including noodle, beef, sauce, dessert, and chef, suggesting that non-U.S. consumers focus more on tangible and aesthetic aspects of gastronomy (Yang & Lee, 2019). This contrast implies that regional consumer cultures mediate how individuals articulate value and satisfaction, reflecting culturally distinct constructions of what constitutes an exceptional dining experience.

frequent co-occurrence of the term Korean in both networks underscores the growing global recognition of Korean cuisine within the fine dining landscape. This pattern suggests that, while local consumer perceptions differ in evaluative focus, the globalization of Michelin-starred gastronomy fosters a shared symbolic discourse around taste, authenticity, and cultural prestige.

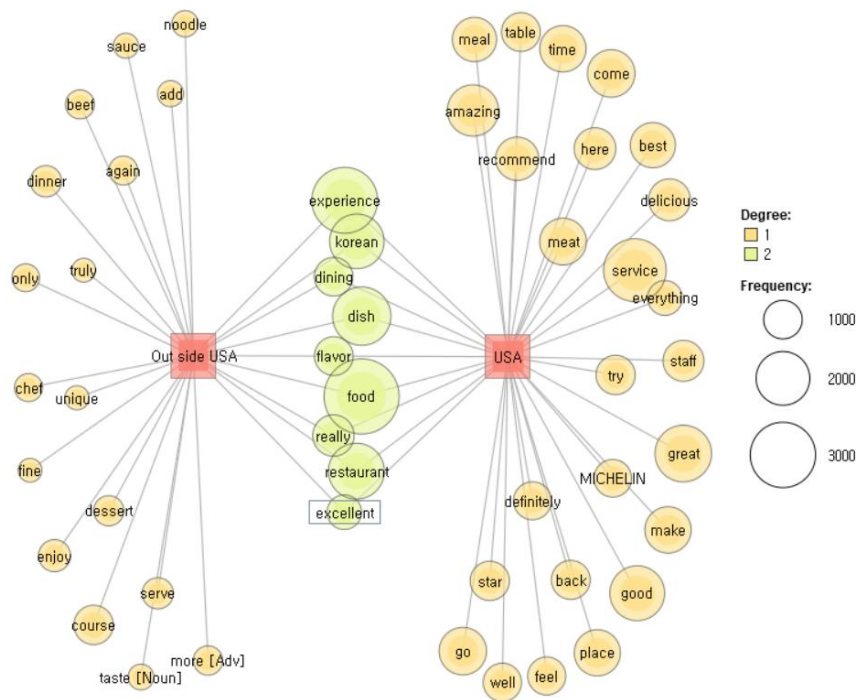


Figure 2. Co-occurrence network analysis between USA and Outside USA

Table 2. Significant Co-occurring Words in USA vs. Outside USA Reviews

Region	Significant Words
USA	Service, MICHELIN, recommend, star, amazing, definitely, here, table, meal, time, come, best, delicious, meat, staff, everything, great, try, make, good, place, back, feel, well, go
Outside USA	noodle, beef, sauce, taste, course, dinner, dessert, chef, only, unique, truly, more again, add, serve, fine, enjoy

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5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusion

The This study explored regional differences in how diners perceive Korean fine dining by analyzing online reviews of Michelin-starred Korean restaurants located inside and outside the United States. Using big data text-mining and co-occurrence network analysis, 9,535 Google Maps reviews were examined to visualize linguistic and thematic variations across regions. The findings revealed distinct patterns in the way customers articulate their dining experiences.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that diners’ evaluations of fine-dining experiences are shaped by cultural expectations and symbolic values (Jin et al., 2012; Chiang & Guo, 2021). Similar to earlier research on Western gastronomy emphasizing service quality and brand prestige, this study shows that U.S. diners perceive

Michelin-starred Korean restaurants primarily through dimensions of professionalism and recognition. In contrast, reviews from non-U.S. regions align with Chung et al. (2016), highlighting authenticity, sensory engagement, and cultural connection as central to satisfaction. By integrating these insights, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating how cultural context mediates the perception of K-Food, expanding understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior in global gastronomy. Reviews from U.S.-based restaurants emphasized service, Michelin prestige, and recommendations, reflecting a perception of Korean fine dining as a symbol of luxury, professionalism, and culinary innovation. Conversely, reviews from outside the U.S. centered on flavor, experience, authenticity, and Korean identity, suggesting a stronger emotional and cultural connection with the cuisine. These differences indicate that diners interpret Korean fine dining through regionally specific frameworks, U.S. consumers focusing on brand and service quality, while global diners prioritize authenticity and experiential immersion.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that K-Food has successfully positioned itself as a global fine-dining phenomenon, yet its meaning and appreciation vary according to regional cultural expectations and dining norms.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

Marketers This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of cross-cultural gastronomy and consumer perception by demonstrating how regional context shapes the linguistic framing of dining experiences. First, it extends prior research on K-Food globalization by providing empirical evidence that diners' evaluations are not universal but culturally contingent, influenced by local dining conventions and prestige systems. Second, the study enriches experiential consumption theory by showing that fine dining involves both tangible and symbolic value dimensions. While U.S. diners highlight the functional and reputational aspects of dining such as Michelin status and service, non-U.S. diners emphasize emotional and cultural authenticity, aligning with the dual model of hedonic versus symbolic consumption (Cairns et al., 2010).

Finally, this research advances methodological innovation in gastronomy studies by employing big data text-mining and co-occurrence network analysis as tools to uncover semantic and emotional distinctions in user-generated content. This approach provides a scalable framework for analyzing large, multilingual review datasets and linking them to cultural interpretations of dining experiences.

Additionally, these findings align with previous studies (Jin et al., 2012; Chiang & Guo, 2021; Chung et al., 2016), confirming that the perception of service excellence and authenticity in gastronomy is shaped by cultural context. This study extends existing theories of cross-cultural consumption and experiential dining by empirically demonstrating how regional norms and prestige systems influence diners' evaluations of Korean fine dining. In doing so, it broadens the theoretical understanding of how cultural factors mediate symbolic and experiential value across global markets.

5.3. Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the results provide actionable insights for restaurateurs, chefs, and policymakers promoting K-Food in global markets. For restaurants in the United States, where diners value prestige, efficiency, and recognition, marketing strategies should emphasize brand reputation, Michelin excellence, and service professionalism. Highlighting awards, culinary innovation, and consistency can strengthen perceived value and reinforce the association between Korean fine dining and international luxury standards.

In contrast, restaurants outside the United States—particularly in Asia and Europe—should focus on communicating authenticity, cultural storytelling, and experiential engagement. Integrating traditional Korean elements, ingredient narratives, and personalized service can enhance emotional resonance and perceived cultural depth. Furthermore, destination marketing organizations can use these insights to craft regionally adaptive promotional strategies, emphasizing either prestige or authenticity depending on audience orientation.

Moreover, the findings provide practical guidance for both industry practitioners and policymakers. Restaurant managers can adapt service delivery, storytelling, and branding

strategies to align with regional consumer expectations—emphasizing prestige and professionalism in Western markets, and authenticity and cultural immersion in Asian contexts. In addition, destination marketing organizations may leverage these insights to promote K-Food globally through regionally customized campaigns, thereby enhancing Korea’s culinary image and international competitiveness.

Collectively, these managerial implications suggest that a localized branding approach, rather than a uniform global strategy is essential for sustaining K-Food’s international success in the fine-dining sector.

5.4. Limitations and Future Studies

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it relies on secondary online review data, which, although extensive, lack detailed demographic information such as age, nationality, or motivation of reviewers. These factors may influence linguistic style and emotional tone, limiting the precision of cross-cultural comparisons.

Second, the analysis focused primarily on English-language reviews, potentially overlooking non-English expressions of cultural meaning in other markets. Future research should incorporate multilingual datasets to capture a more comprehensive view of global diner perceptions.

Third, this study focused solely on co-occurrence and correspondence analyses; future studies could extend the findings using sentiment analysis, topic modeling, or social network analytics to quantify emotional polarity and narrative structure.

Finally, longitudinal research examining changes in perception before and after Michelin recognition or overtime would enhance understanding of how K-Food’s global identity evolves. Future comparative studies could also explore other emerging culinary markets, such as Korean fine dining in Europe or the Middle East to broaden the theoretical and practical understanding of K-Food’s cross-cultural adaptation.

Supplementary Materials: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon request.

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