THE INFLUENCE OF mHEALTH APPS' AFFORDANCE ON CONSUMERS' FOOD NEOPHILIA

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ABSTRACT

Mobile health apps (mHealth apps) offer dietary guidance to consumers, and they often include recommendations for novel foods. While research has examined consumers' acceptance of novel foods, the role of mHealth apps in influencing consumers' decisions to accept novel foods is still unclear, given the novelty and uncertainty surrounding them. Based on the affordance theory, this paper explores how the affordances of mHealth apps influence consumers' perception of food novelty and food neophilia, and the moderating effect of novel food market availability on consumers' food neophilia. This study combines PLS-SEM with fsQCA to obtain a nuanced understanding of their role. The PLS analysis reveals that the two affordances of mHealth apps (i.e., food customization and food guidance) significantly influence consumers' formation of food neophilia. The results also indicate that the market availability of novel foods has a positive moderating effect on the shape of food neophilia. The fsQCA analysis identifies three configurations that lead to high food neophilia, with food novelty being an indispensable condition for the formation of high food neophilia. The findings of this paper enrich the theory of technology affordance and food neophilia and provide practical guidance for mHealth app development.

Keywords*:* Food neophilia; mHealth apps; Novel food purchases; Affordance theory

1. Introduction

Novel foods refer to food products that are produced using new technologies (such as lab-grown meat), ingredients, and processes. They carry with them a promise of improving public health and sustainability (Stock and Zacharias, 2013). As they are not so well known, people can discover them using the modern mobile health (mHealth) apps, such as *Keep* and *BetterMe*. Such apps guide users towards better health outcomes through monitoring, managing

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exercises, and dietary advice (James et al., 2019; Sama et al., 2014). These mHealth apps frequently recommend personalized dietary solutions from nutrition experts. For many users, these recommendations include unfamiliar food combinations or ingredients. Although professionally endorsed, these unfamiliar items effectively function as novel foods from the consumer's perspective, introducing uncertainty and requiring a leap of faith (Tuorila et al., 2001).

What makes consumers accept such foods, given their novelty and the uncertainty in trying them? The existing research identifies extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influence their decision to accept. The extrinsic factors include the attributes of the novel food product (such as nutritional content and production method) and their availability in the market (Singh and Verma, 2017). The intrinsic factors include the consumers' food neophilia – a willingness to try unfamiliar foods. Scholars (D'Souza, 2022; Ji et al., 2016; Mak et al., 2017; Raudenbush and Frank, 1999; Wortmann et al., 2023) position consumers' food neophilia as a key internal motivator for trying and accepting novel foods. However, we do not yet understand the role of mHealth apps in shaping consumers' perception and willingness to try novel foods. The existing research has extensively analyzed user engagement with these apps (Hu et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2021), but has comparatively overlooked their role in dietary guidance for novel foods.

Therefore, in this study, we examine *how the key technological affordances of mHealth apps shape and influence consumer food neophilia.* We examine the same from the perspective of technology affordance. Technology Affordance theory centers on the action possibilities that a technology offers to users based on its design and the user's capabilities. In the context of mHealth apps, this study does not merely focus on *whether* consumers use the app (adoption), but *how* the app's features (e.g., food customization, food guidance) *enable* specific behaviors such as navigating food neophilia (affordance).

This study makes two significant theoretical contributions. First, it advances technology affordance theory by conceptualizing personalization and guidance as core affordances in the mHealth context, and by offering a nuanced framework for user-technology interaction. Second, this study bridges the mHealth and consumer psychology literature by elucidating the mechanism behind the formation of novelty perception and food neophilia. In doing so, it uncovers the psychological pathway from technology interaction to novel food acceptance, enriching our understanding of consumer decisions in the digital health environment.

The findings also yield significant practical implications. For mHealth developers, this research provides actionable insights for designing features. By strategically enhancing personalization and guidance, apps can more effectively reduce consumer uncertainty, build trust, and drive the trial of novel foods. For the wider food and wellness industry, this study shows how mHealth apps can be leveraged as a powerful marketing and sales channel. This can improve the commercial performance of both apps and innovative food products, creating a synergistic ecosystem that connects health-conscious consumers with novel dietary solutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Novel Food and Food Neophilia

Novel food refers to items that offer new or unfamiliar culinary experiences, a characteristic that significantly influences consumers' purchase behavior (Tuorila et al., 2001). The novelty inherent in these foods can pique consumer curiosity and satisfy unique desires, contributing to perceived health and emotional benefits (Kim and Choe, 2019; Shin and Lee, 2021). However, the willingness to engage with such foods is not universal; it is primarily governed by the key personality trait of *food neophilia*, which is an individual's positive attitude and propensity toward trying novel foods (Chen et al., 2021; Pliner and Hobden, 1992). Consumers high in neophilia often expect new foods to provide unique flavors, nutritional diversity, and memorable taste and health experiences (Ma et al., 2025; Rozin, 1991).

A range of contributing factors influences the formation of food neophilia. As summarized in Table 1, these can be broadly categorized into three categories. The first category includes personality traits of consumers, such as openness, age, and gender (Nawaz et al., 2019; Okumus et al., 2021). The second category includes the pursuit of improved health. It is a strong motivator as trying novel foods is linked to better dietary variety and can aid in weight management (Latimer et al., 2015; Wortmann et al., 2023). The third category includes the characteristics of the novel food and the context of consumption. For instance, travelers often show higher neophilia towards local foods (Hussain et al., 2023). Their attributes, such as "organic", can also facilitate neophilia (Rehman et al., 2023).

Table 1. Research on food neophilia

Research Topics	Source	Main variables	Key findings
Consumption of novel food in the travel scene	(Ji et al., 2016)	Neophilic tendency, neophobic tendency, Novelty seeking, Food Satisfaction, Novel food consumption	The actual food consumption of tourists depends on the personality traits of tourists, i.e., food neophilia
Consumption of novel food in the travel scene	(Hussain et al., 2023)	Food neophilia, food neophobia, attitude towards local food, intention to try local food	Food neophilia strengthens the relationship between tourists' attitudes towards local food and their willingness to try local food. However, food neophobia weakens the relationship between the two
Consumption of genetically modified novel foods	(Nawaz et al., 2019)	Food neophilia, health concerns, benefits perceived, willingness to consume GMO	Consumers of food neophilia often consider the positive attributes of novel foods, thus promoting consumer consumption of genetically modified foods
Organic novel food satisfaction	(Rehman et al., 2023)	Food neophilia, food neophobia, satisfaction toward organic food	Food neophilia significantly increases consumer satisfaction with organic food
Novel Food attributes and food neophilia	(Baah et al., 2020)	Neophilic tendency, perceived attributes, emotional reaction, post-consumption intention	Food neophilia consumers are more likely to be accepted by local cuisine, and tend to have positive perceptions of food, positive emotional dispositions, and are likely to consume it again in the future and recommend it to others
Consumer characteristics and food neophilia	(Okumus et al., 2021)	gender, generation, food neophilia, food neophilia	Consumers' food neophilia varies by gender and age
Consumption of exotic novel food	(Derinalp Çanakçı and Birdir, 2020)	Food variety seeking, food involvement, and neophobia	The attractiveness dimension of food involvement has a positive and significant effect on food variety seeking

The external environment also plays an important role in influencing the effect of these internal and contextual factors on consumers' willingness to try. The availability of novel food on the market is a primary external factor. Market availability represents the ease with which a consumer can purchase the novel food and influences their purchase decisions (Contini et al., 2018). High market availability of a novel food—characterized by a stable supply, accessible price, and efficient distribution—promotes consumer purchases by creating tangible opportunities for neophilic individuals to satisfy their curiosity. Conversely, low availability can inhibit the purchase, even for a highly neophilic consumer (Contini et al., 2020; Yean et al., 2019).

While these factors are well-documented, existing studies have paid less attention to the role of modern digital tools. Specifically, there is a lack of research examining the mechanisms by which mHealth apps can systematically foster consumer food neophilia and influence consumers' purchase behavior.

2.2 Technology Affordances of mHealth Apps

Technology affordances refer to the perceived action possibilities that a technology offers to its users. It helps understand how users interact with and derive value from a technology. It is different from technology adoption, which primarily focuses on the initial decision and act of accepting and incorporating a new technology into use. Since we are examining the role of mHealth in influencing a consumer's food neophilia, we use the technology affordances lens as the key theoretical foundation in this study. This lens will help us understand *how* the distinct food customization and food guidance capabilities (affordances) of mHealth apps directly influence consumers' food neophilia beyond their adoption.

The theory of technology affordance has been widely applied across various information technology domains. For instance, social commerce platforms offer affordances such as visibility, metavoicing, triggered attending, guidance shopping, social connecting, and trading (Dong and Wang, 2018); social media platforms allow personalized online communication through affordances like accessibility, information retrieval, editability, and association(Chan et al., 2019); and online gaming technologies offer users hedonic possibilities through affordances, such as achievement, social interaction, and immersion (Lee et al., 2021). However, despite the growing role of mHealth apps in daily life, few studies have rigorously examined their specific technological affordances, particularly concerning dietary behaviors and novel food exploration.

mHealth apps are uniquely designed to provide personalized health support, often including dietary guidance tailored to users' exercise data and health status (James et al., 2019). Within this specialized context and given our focus on consumers' food neophilia, the two most salient and impactful technological affordances are food customization and food guidance. While there are many affordances in mHealth apps, we chose these two specific affordances because of their direct operational relevance to how mHealth apps can facilitate engagement with dietary choices and encourage the adoption of novel foods.

Food customization refers to the affordance of mHealth apps that allow users to personalize their food choices according to their preferences, dietary restrictions, and specific health goals (Rosenbaum et al., 2021). This capability empowers users to actively shape their dietary experience by customizing recipes and setting health targets within the app, thus meeting their health needs and allowing them to integrate new or uncommon ingredients based on their choice. The food guidance affordance refers to the app's capability to provide personalized dietary recommendations. This includes suggestive features such as novel food recommendations, detailed food usage introductions, and tailored meal suggestions (Dong and Wang, 2018; Sun et al., 2019). This affordance is instrumental in helping consumers rationalize their diet thus promoting their overall health (Dong and Wang, 2018) by systematically introducing and explaining new dietary options.

These two affordances are particularly critical because food customization empowers users to proactively explore and integrate new foods into their diet based on personal control. In contrast, food guidance directly exposes users to novel food concepts and provides the necessary information to overcome unfamiliarity. Therefore, this paper focuses on understanding the mechanism through which the food customization and food guidance affordances of mHealth apps influence consumers' food neophilia.

3. Research Model And Hypotheses

Our study investigates how the technology affordance of mHealth apps affects consumer food neophilia. Based on the above discussion, we propose a research model as presented in Figure 1.

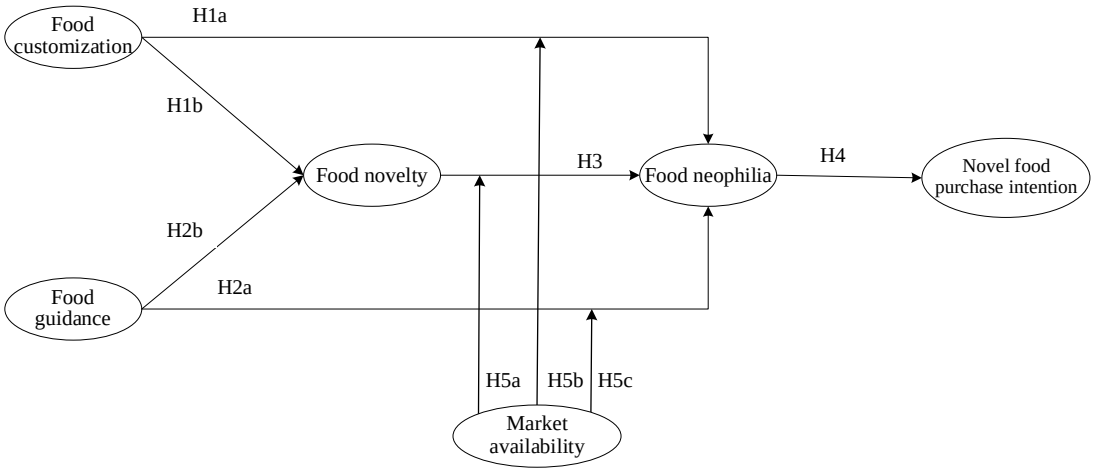

Figure 1. Research model

3.1 The impact of mHealth apps' affordances on food neophilia

mHealth apps empower consumers to customize food according to their preferences (Srinivasan et al., 2002). Consumers can use these apps to interpret their health data, search for novel food information, and then find and customize optimal meal plans. This *food customization* affordance enables a better match between consumer preferences and novel foods, thus significantly enhancing their overall consumer experience(Simonson, 2005; Sundar, 2008).

During the food customization process, consumers actively engage with mHealth apps which provide information about novel foods. Such engagement allows them to gain a deeper understanding of a novel food's nutrition, serving methods, and other characteristics (Goulart et al., 2020). It also helps them discover and perceive the novelty of food items.

Through active customization with mHealth apps, users get exposed to, explore, and ultimately adopt novel food options. Their novel food experiences, in turn, directly stimulate them to form positive food neophilia attitudes, as the inherent newness and exploratory nature of these foods align with and satisfy the desire for novel dietary experiences.

Therefore, we propose that while food customization facilitates the encounter with new dietary options, the novelty of the food itself serves as the primary driver for food neophilia. Hence, we hypothesize:

H1a: Food customization positively influences food neophilia.
H1b: Food customization positively influences food novelty.

mHealth apps empower consumers with personalized food recommendations by offering comprehensive food guides (Dong and Wang, 2018). They provide not just basic information but also professional interpretation of users' exercise and health data. Armed with this information, apps can then curate and deliver novel food recommendations. This personalized approach offers a significant advantage over consumers independently seeking food information, as the guidance from mHealth apps is inherently more persuasive. This increased persuasiveness is particularly crucial in mitigating the perceived risks associated with purchasing novel foods (Dong and Wang, 2018).

The accuracy of the *food guidance* provided by mHealth apps depends on their ability to aggregate and process the information from suppliers about the quality and consumption methods of novel foods. Such information also helps consumers discover and appreciate the novelty of new food items. Furthermore, this affordance also actively promotes interaction between users and the app. This interaction is key to enhancing consumer engagement and fostering a sense of belonging to the mHealth app community. In turn, this increased engagement and belonging facilitate greater trust in the food recommendation content provided by the apps.

The rich visuals and interactive capabilities embedded in mHealth apps also play a vital role. Features such as high-quality images, video demonstrations of cooking novel dishes, and augmented reality (AR) overlays showing nutritional information on a physical product stimulate curiosity and a desire for new experiences, thereby enhancing consumers' food neophilia(Chen et al., 2021). The ability of these apps to provide real-time, contextualized information, such as the nutrients in a novel food, its ingredients, and immediate feedback on dietary choices, further solidifies user trust and reinforces the perceived benefits of trying novel, healthy foods. Such immediate feedback mechanisms can also lead to habit formation around novel food consumption. Such diverse features collectively enhance the information richness and reduce the cognitive burden and perceived risk associated with exploring new food options. Thus, food guidance, bolstered by the diverse features and interactive capabilities of mHealth apps, demonstrably increases the amount of information available to consumers and effectively reduces the purchase risk associated with trying novel foods. Hence, we hypothesize:

H2a: Food guidance positively influences food neophilia.
H2b: Food guidance positively influences food novelty.

3.2 The effect of food novelty on food neophilia

Food novelty refers to consumers' subjective impression of characteristics such as food appearance and food efficacy, thus reflecting significant differences between novel foods and other foods (Ha and Jang, 2013; Verbeke and Poquiviqui Lopez, 2005). Apart from satisfying consumers' curiosity, food novelty also allows them to experience the pleasure of discovering novel foods(Bloch et al., 2003). Purchasing novel foods also highlights their above-average taste for novel foods. Therefore, the more novel the food is, the greater the consumers' willingness to try it (Yıldız, 2017). Therefore, food novelty is the key to motivating consumers to engage in food neophilia (Mak et al., 2017). In mHealth apps, food novelty is highlighted through pictures, sounds, videos, and other consumer recommendations(Deng et al., 2025). Hence, we hypothesize:

H3: Food novelty positively influences food neophilia.

Food neophilia is defined as consumers' positive attitude toward trying novel foods and is a major influencer of their purchase of novel foods (D'Souza, 2022; Ji et al., 2016; Veeck, 2010). Consumers seek novel and varied foods to satisfy their taste and health needs (Goulart et al., 2020; Nawaz et al., 2019; Pliner and Hobden, 1992). In mHealth apps, food neophilia drives consumers to continually pay attention to novel food information that can assist them in making timely and correct novel food purchase decisions. Hence, we hypothesize:

H4: Food neophilia positively influences customers' novel food purchase intention.

3.3 The moderating role of market availability

Market availability refers to a consumer's subjective assessment of how easy or difficult it is to acquire a particular product (Jayashankar and Raju, 2020). Products with high market availability are typically characterized by reasonable prices, ease of storage, and efficient transport. Conversely, products with low market availability are often challenging to store and transport and tend to be expensive. Within mHealth apps, consumers use information such as logistics details, potential substitutes, pricing, and user reviews of novel foods to assess their market availability (Fotopoulos and Krystallis, 2002; Yean et al., 2019).

Market availability moderates the relationship between various antecedents and consumer behavior. It acts as a crucial enabling factor and sets the boundary condition. If the market availability is low, consumers, despite finding a novel food, customizing it to their liking, or receiving strong recommendation, may face practical barriers (e.g., high price, difficulty finding it, long delivery times) that prevent them from trying novel foods. Conversely, when market availability is high, these factors become less important. High availability removes friction points, allowing the positive effects of perceived novelty, personalized options, and informed guidance to translate into stronger intentions to try novel foods. Therefore, we posit that market availability positively moderates these relationships:

H5a: Market availability positively moderates the relationship between food novelty and food neophilia.
H5b: Market availability positively moderates the relationship between food customization and food neophilia.
H5c: Market availability positively moderates the relationship between food guidance and food neophilia.

4. Research Design and Methodology

We adopted the quantitative research methodology using a survey method to collect the data for this study. We used Mint Health, a mHealth app, as the research platform. Mint Health focuses on diet management, integrating customized recipes, diet analysis, food nutrition inquiry, calorie inquiry, and other functions. In addition, Mint Health has also launched "New on Thursday" and "New Day," which aim to introduce novel foods suitable for different consumers at specific points in time according to the seasons. As of December 2022, Mint Health has an average of 10 million monthly active users, making it easier for us to find a suitable sample.

4.1 Questionnaire Development

To ensure the content validity of the scale, we adapted the existing validated scales to the context of mHealth apps. All variables were measured using the first-order reflective measurement model. The items for food customization were adapted from Srinivasan et al. (2002). The items for food guidance were adapted from Dong and Wang (2018). We adapted three items from their scale to fit the context of mHealth apps. The items for food neophilia were adapted from Pliner and Hobden (1992). The items for food novelty were adapted from Stock and Zacharias (2013). Items for market availability were adapted from Contini et al. (2018). The items for novel food purchase intention were adapted from Asif et al. (2018). All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for "strongly disagree" and 7 stands for "strongly agree".

Since the respondents were Chinese, we adopted the back-translation method to convert the English items into the Chinese language. We then invited two e-commerce teachers and five e-commerce graduate students to check the statements and semantics of the measurement items. Based on the feedback, we revised the scale. The final items and their source is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Measurement Scales

Variable and source	Item content
Food customization (FC) (Srinivasan et al., 2002)	FC1: MHealth app makes purchase recommendations that match my needs
	FC2: The food advertisements and promotions that mHealth app sends to me are tailored to my situation
	FC3: I believe that the mHealth app is customized to my needs
Food guidance (FG) (Dong and Wang, 2018)	FG1: MHealth app can help me establish my food needs without any restrictions
	FG2: MHealth app can help me identify which food attributes best fit my needs
	FG3: MHealth app can provide me with food recommendations based on my needs
Food neophilia (FN) (Pliner and Hobden, 1992)	FN1: I often search for information about novel foods in mHealth app
	FN2: I like novel foods with different ethnic characteristics
	FN3: I would try novel foods
Food novelty (N) (Stock and Zacharias, 2013)	N1: Novel foods are creative in mHealth apps
	N2: Novel foods in mHealth apps are unpredictable
	N3: Novel foods in mHealth apps are unusual
Market availability (MA) (Contini et al., 2018)	MA1: A vast range of novel foods is available in MHA
	MA2: The mHealth apps I use often keep putting out novel foods
	MA3: When I want to eat novel foods, I have no trouble buying them in mHealth apps
Novel food purchase intention (NFPI) (Asif et al., 2018)	NFPI1: I would consider buying novel food in mHealth apps
	NFPI2: I would be willing to purchase novel food in mHealth apps
	NFPI3: I plan to purchase novel food in mHealth apps

4.2 Data Collection

The survey was posted as a web link in the Mint Health community. We selected those respondents who had the experience of purchasing a novel food from the Mint shop within the last three months through a filter question in the survey. To motivate participation in the survey, we rewarded all respondents with a 15 RMB red packet. The survey lasted for one month, and we received 523 responses. After excluding the questionnaires with incomplete answers, we were left with 477 valid responses. Table 3 provides demographic information about the respondents. In the sample, males (n=232) accounted for 48.40% of the total respondents, and females (n=245) accounted for 51.60%; 85.5% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 40 years old; 85.5% of the respondents had an education level of college and above; and 96.9% of the respondents had a monthly disposable income of less than 7,000 RMB.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Number	Ratio
Gender	Male	232	48.40%
	Female	245	51.60%
Age	18~22	52	10.90%
	23~25	95	19.90%
	26~30	160	33.50%
	31~40	101	21.20%
	41~45	43	9.00%
	＞45	26	5.50%
Education	High School and below	74	15.50%
	College	90	18.90%
	Undergraduate	231	48.40%
	Master's degree (or equivalent)	75	15.70%
	Doctorate and above	7	1.50%
Career	Students	95	19.90%
	Enterprise workers	186	39.00%
	Individuals	70	14.70%
	Public Officials	49	10.30%
	Teachers	21	4.40%
	Workers	42	8.80%
	Others	14	2.90%
Average monthly income （RMB）	＜1000	49	10.30%
	1000~2999	189	39.60%
	3000~4999	163	34.20%
	5000~6999	61	12.80%
	＞7000	15	3.10%

Since the data was self-reported, we checked for the possibility of common method bias using Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003) and the marker variable technique (Malhotra et al., 2006). In Harman's test, the highest covariance explained by any single factor was 38.46%. No single factor accounted for more than 50% variability in the data.

In the marker variable technique, we chose 'occupation', which is theoretically unrelated to endogenous variables. The result reveals that the average correlation between the marker variable and other variables is only 0.062, less than 0.100. Therefore, common method bias is not likely to be an issue in our study.

5. Data Analysis and Results

To analyze the data of this study, we employed a combination of Partial Least Squares -Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) and Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), as shown in Figure 2. PLS-SEM, a

variance-based technique, is suitable for exploratory theory building and can effectively handle complex relationships between multiple independent and dependent variables (Gefen et al., 2000; Lowry and Gaskin, 2014). Therefore, we used PLS-SEM to assess the impact of the affordance of MHAs on consumers' food neophilia. However, PLS-SEM has certain limitations in explaining complex causal relationships and dependencies between independent variables, particularly in analyzing causal asymmetry and multiple concurrent causal relationships (Pappas et al., 2017). Therefore, we used fsQCA – A technique that combines both qualitative and quantitative analysis. It is based on set theory and Boolean operations, and can reveal the complex interactions among causal asymmetric and antecedent conditions (Ragin, 2014). By identifying how different combinations of conditions influence the outcomes, fsQCA compensates for the shortcomings of PLS-SEM, particularly in handling interdependencies among variables and asymmetric causal relationships (Pappas et al., 2017). Previous research has shown that PLS-SEM and fsQCA can complement each other, offering a more comprehensive analytical perspective (Lin et al., 2024; Yan et al., 2023). Therefore, we used PLS-SEM to reveal the optimal solution and combined it with fsQCA to analyze complex causal relationships deeply, thus enhancing the reliability and explanatory power of the research.

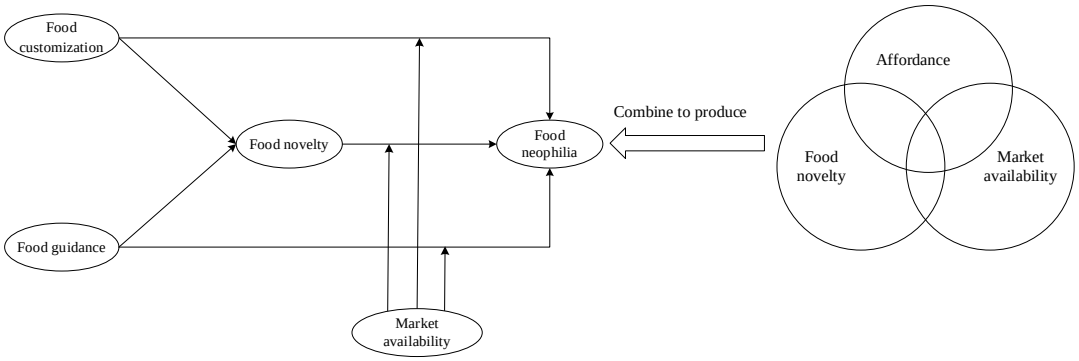

Figure 2. Research Overview

5.1 PLS-SEM

5.1.1 Measurement Model

We assessed the scale's validity using confirmatory factor analysis. The results of the analyses of reliability and convergent validity are presented in Table 4. The composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values were above 0.7, indicating that the measurement has good internal consistency and reliability (Hair et al., 2011). The standardized loadings of the first-order variables were above the threshold of 0.70 (Benitez et al., 2020), and the average extracted variance value (AVE) values of the measurement items for each variable were greater than 0.50, suggesting that the scale had good convergent validity(Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). The fit values were also good. The Standardized Root Mean Square Residual value was 0.043 (< 0.08) and the NFI was 0.919 (> 0.90). Also the dULS < bootstrapped HI 95% of dULS and dG < bootstrapped HI 95% of dG, indicating that the data fitted the model well (Ramayah et al., 2017).

Table 4. Results on Reliability and Convergent Validity

Factor	Item	Standard loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's α
Food customization	FC1	0.847	0.703	0.876	0.789
(FC)	FC2	0.835			
	FC3	0.833			
Food guidance	FG1	0.895	0.756	0.903	0.838
(FG)	FG2	0.853			
	FG3	0.859			
Food neophilia	FN1	0.725	0.648	0.846	0.731
(FN)	FN2	0.875			
	FN3	0.808			
Food novelty	N1	0.871	0.718	0.884	0.804

(N)	N2	0.872			
	N3	0.798			
Market availability	MA1	0.869	0.719	0.885	0.805
(MA)	MA2	0.827			
	MA3	0.848			
Novel food purchase intention	NFPI1	0.838	0.695	0.872	0.781
(NFPI)	NFPI2	0.832			
	NFPI3	0.831			

Table 5 presents the discriminant validity analysis results in Table 5, which show that the values of HTMT do not exceed the recommended threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2016). This indicates that the scale has good discriminant validity (Gefen and Straub, 2005).

Table 5. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

Factor	FC	FN	FG	MA	N	NFPI
FC						
FN	0.579					
FG	0.685	0.658				
MA	0.57	0.527	0.571			
N	0.631	0.575	0.647	0.728		
NFPI	0.543	0.819	0.571	0.607	0.696	

5.1.2 Structural Model

The structural model was analyzed using SmartPLS 4.0. The results of the data analysis are presented in Figure 3. Consistent with hypothesis H1a, food customization positively and significantly influences food neophilia ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, the data indicates a positive effect between food customization and food novelty ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting hypothesis H1b. In addition, food guidance positively influences food neophilia ($\beta = 0.326$, $p < 0.001$) and food novelty ($\beta = 0.364$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting hypotheses H2a and H2b. Furthermore, consistent with hypotheses H3 and H4, food novelty positively influences food neophilia ($\beta = 0.204$, $p < 0.001$), and food neophilia significantly influences consumers' intention to purchase novel food ($\beta = 0.634$, $p < 0.001$). The explained variance for food novelty, food neophilia, and novel food purchase intention is 34.6 %, 33.3 %, and 40.2 %, respectively.

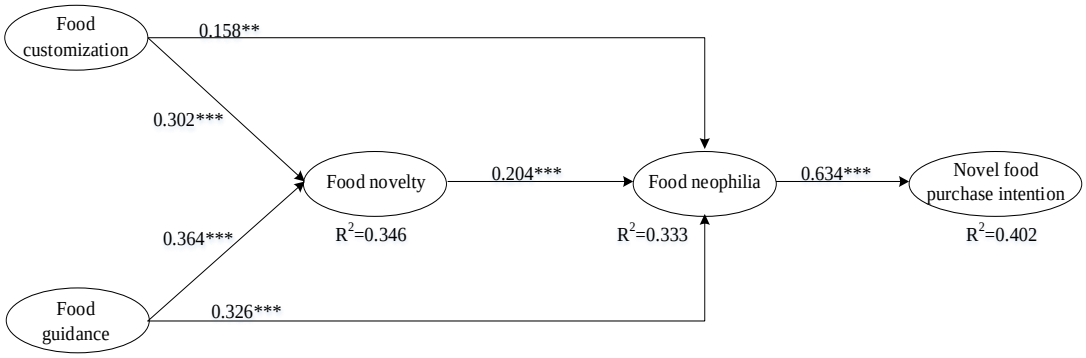

Figure 3. Path Diagram (*p< 0.05; ** p< 0.01；***p< 0.001).

5.1.3 Testing for Moderating Effects

To test the moderating effects of market availability, we used SPSS. In Table 6, from Model 3, the regression coefficient of Food guidance*Market availability is significant ($\beta = 0.111$, $p < 0.05$), which means market availability

positively moderates the positive relationship between food guidance and food neophilia. Therefore, hypothesis H5c was supported. The regression coefficient of Food novelty x Market availability was significant ($\beta = 0.115$, $p < 0.05$), which means market availability moderates the positive relationship between food novelty and food neophilia. Thus, hypothesis H5a was supported. The regression coefficient of Food customization x Market availability was not significant. Thus, hypothesis H5b was not supported.

Table 6. Tests of Moderating Effects of Market Availability

Variable	Food neophilia		
	Model1	**Model2**	**Model3**
Step1（control variables）			
age	0.087	0.078	0.059
gender	0.079	-0.091	-0.098
Step2（main effect）			
Food customization		0.162***	0.156***
Food guidance		0.309***	0.296***
Food novelty		0.152**	0.148**
Market availability		0.118*	0.208***
Step3（moderating effect）			
Food customization *Market availability			-0.014
Food guidance *Market availability			0.111*
Food novelty*Market availability			0.115*
R^2	0.012	0.346	0.374
ΔR^2	0.012	0.334	0.028
F-value	2.999	41.453***	31.016***

In order to more directly show the moderating effect of market availability on the relationship between mHealth apps' affordance and food neophilia, this study made a graphical diagram using simple slope analysis. As can be seen from Figure 4, the slope under high market availability is significantly larger than that under low market availability, which means market availability positively moderates the positive influence of food guidance on consumers' food neophilia. Thus, Hypothesis H5c is further supported.

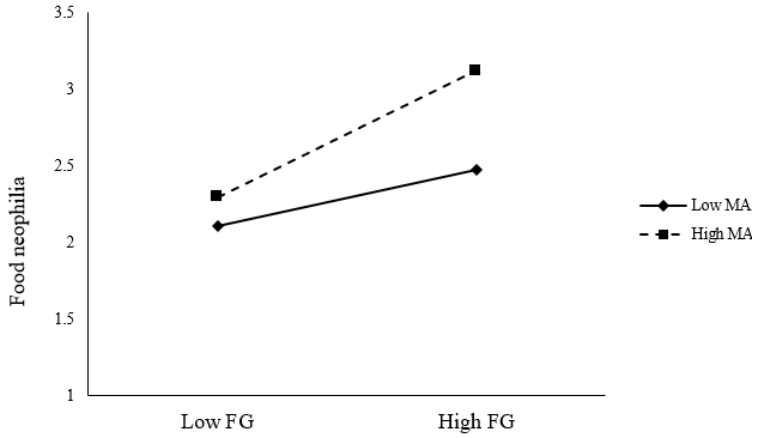

Figure 4. Moderating effect of MA on FG-FN

As shown in Figure 5, the slope in the high market availability condition is significantly larger than in the low market availability condition. The effect of food novelty on food neophilia is stronger when market availability is at a high level, indicating a positive moderating effect of market availability between food novelty and food neophilia. Thus, H5a was further supported.

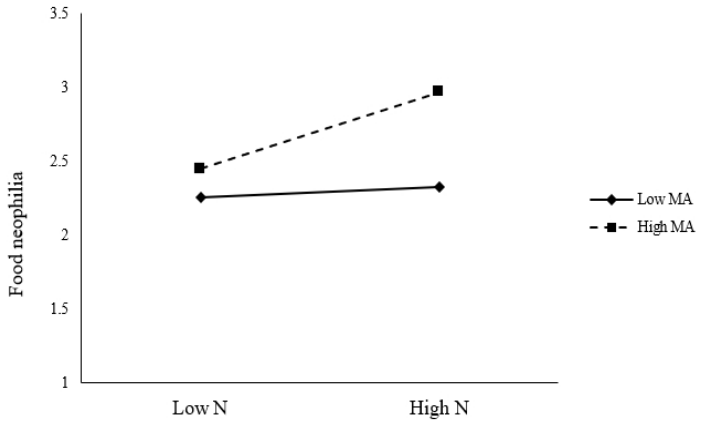

Figure 5. Moderating Effect of MA on N-FN

5.1.4 Mediation Test

The mediating effects were examined using the bootstrapping method. The results are shown in Table 7. We find that food customization and food guidance have a smaller effect on food neophilia (DV) when food novelty (MV) is present ($0.2896^{***} < 0.4404^{***}$, $0.3868^{***} < 0.5144^{***}$). This suggests that food novelty plays a partial mediating role between food customization and food neophilia, as well as between food guidance and food neophilia. Thus, it is the novel food that enhances neophilia, not the technology affordance itself.

Table 7. Results of the Mediation Effect Test for Food Novelty

IV	M	DV	①IV→DV	②IV→M	③IV+M→DV	
					IV	M
FC	N	FN	0.4404^{***}	0.5028^{***}	0.2896^{***}	0.2999^{***}
FG	N	FN	0.5144^{***}	0.5326^{***}	0.3868^{***}	0.2395^{***}

The results of the mediating effects of food neophilia are shown in Table 8. the data showed that food customization, food novelty, and food neophilia (IV) had less effect on food neophilia (DV) when food novelty (MV) was present ($0.1902^{***} < 0.4264^{***}$, $0.3482^{***} < 0.5553^{***}$ ，$0.1928^{***} < 0.4607^{***}$). This suggests that food neophilia partially mediates the relationship between food customization and novel food purchase intention, food novelty and novel food purchase intention, and food guidance and novel food purchase intention, respectively. Thus, it is food neophilia that enhances new food purchase intention, not the technology affordance itself.

Table 8. Results of the Mediation Effect Test for Food Neophilia

IV	M	DV	①IV→DV	②IV→M	③IV+M→DV	
					IV	M
FC	FN	NFPI	0.4264^{***}	0.4404^{***}	0.1902^{***}	0.5361^{***}
N	FN	NFPI	0.5553^{***}	0.4456^{***}	0.3482^{***}	0.4648^{***}
FG	FN	NFPI	0.4607^{***}	0.5144^{***}	0.1928^{***}	0.5207^{***}

5.2 fsQCA

The empirical results of the PLS-SEM provide evidence of the net effect of MHA affordance on food neophilia. However, the formation of food neophilia may be influenced by a combination of various factors. Therefore, this study employs fsQCA to investigate the combinations of conditions that lead to high food neophilia among consumers.

5.2.1 Data Calibration

To conduct the fsQCA analysis, this study first calibrated the survey data (Pappas et al., 2017), converting the values of variables into fuzzy set membership scores within the range of 0 to 1. Specifically, 0 represents complete

non-membership in the set, 0.5 serves as the crossover point, and 1 represents full membership in the set. To achieve this calibration, the study adopts the quartile method, using the 80th percentile, mean, and 20th percentile of each variable as anchors for membership scores of 1, 0.5, and 0, respectively.

5.2.2 Necessary Conditions Analysis

To examine whether any of the elements—food customization, food guidance, food novelty, or market availability—constitute a necessary condition for high food neophilia, we conducted a necessary conditions analysis (Ragin, 2009). As shown in Table 9, the consistency values all fall below the threshold of 0.9, suggesting that none of these conditions can be considered necessary for high food neophilia. Therefore, we should further explore configurational analysis (Fiss, 2011).

Table 9. Necessary Conditions Analysis

Conditions	High Food neophilia		Low Food neophilia	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Food customization	0.710	0.748	0.374	0.355
~Food customization	0.387	0.407	0.734	0.696
Food guidance	0.716	0.786	0.351	0.348
~Food guidance	0.406	0.409	0.784	0.714
Food novelty	0.690	0.753	0.356	0.350
~Food novelty	0.404	0.410	0.749	0.686
Market availability	0.775	0.708	0.467	0.385
~Market availability	0.327	0.405	0.646	0.722

5.2.3 Configurational Analysis

As shown in Table 10, three configurational pathways lead to high food neophilia. The overall coverage is 0.621. The overall consistency is 0.845, and the consistency of each path exceeds the 0.8 threshold (Ragin, 2009).

The raw coverage of Configuration 1 is 0.503. This configuration suggests that food guidance and food novelty are core conditions, with food customization affordance serving as a peripheral condition. That is, regardless of whether consumers perceive market availability, as long as the affordance of MHAs exists and makes consumers perceive food novelty, they will exhibit high food neophilia.

The raw coverage of Configuration 2 is 0.531. This configuration shows that even if MHAs do not provide food guidance affordance, as long as they offer food customization and make consumers perceive food novelty and recognize market availability, consumers can still develop high food neophilia.

The raw coverage of Configuration 3 is 0.541. This configuration suggests that market availability serves as a peripheral condition, while food customization affordance and food novelty are core conditions that can lead to high food neophilia in consumers. These three configurations demonstrate the diversity of conditions under which high food neophilia arises.

Table 10. Configurations Leading to High Food Neophilia

configuration	solutions		
	C1	C2	C3
Food customization	●	●	
Food guidance	●		●
Food novelty	●	●	●
Market availability		●	●
Raw coverage	0.503	0.531	0.541
unique coverage	0.026	0.054	0.064
consistency	0.896	0.881	0.875
solution coverage	**0.621**		
solution consistency	**0.845**		

Note: ● indicates the presence of a core condition; ●indicates the presence of a peripheral condition; a blank space indicates that the condition can either be present or absent.

6. Discussions and Implications

6.1 Discussion of Findings

In this study, we explored the mechanism to explain how mHealth apps influence consumers' food neophilia. We used the technology affordance theory to explain the mechanism. The results of the study confirm all our hypotheses.

First, we found that the affordances (food customization and food guidance) of mHealth apps influence consumers' food neophilia. The affordances of food customization and food guidance significantly and positively influence food neophilia (H1a, H2a). The technology affordances of mHealth apps satisfy consumers' needs for food customization and guidance, as they stimulate the formation of food neophilia. Consistent with previous findings, technology affordance fulfills the function of information technology by satisfying consumers' psychological needs (e.g., food neophilia) and functional needs (e.g., concrete food guidance and customization) (Luo et al., 2023; Teng, 2021).

Second, we examined the effect of mHealth apps' affordances on food novelty. We found that the mHealth app affordances had a significant positive effect on food novelty (H1b, H2b), indicating that food customization and food guidance affordances play a key role in consumers' perception of novel food attributes. Food customization and food guidance provide consumers with complete information about novel food, which helps them understand novel food attributes and thus facilitates the formation of food neophilia (H3). In addition, food novelty partially mediates the relationship between food customization and food neophilia, and between food guidance and food neophilia. This suggests that food novelty is an essential channel through which mHealth apps' affordances promote the formation of food neophilia (Shin and Lee, 2021).

Third, we examined the impact of food neophilia on consumers' novel food purchasing decisions. Food neophilia positively affected consumers' willingness to purchase novel food (H4), indicating that consumers with positive attitudes towards novel food were more likely to try novel food. In addition, food neophilia partially mediated the relationships between food customization and novel food purchase intention, food novelty and novel food purchase intention, and food guidance and novel food purchase intention. Thus, food neophilia exerts a key influence on consumers' purchase decisions for novel foods (Herzenstein et al., 2007). This finding validates that food neophilia is consumers' positive attitude toward novel food(Sogari, 2015; Vidigal et al., 2015).

Fourth, we examined the moderating effect of market availability on food neophilia. We found that market availability positively moderated the relationships between food novelty and food neophilia, and food guidance and food neophilia (H5a, H5b). This suggests that food novelty and food guidance play a significant role in the formation of food neophilia in the case of high market availability, a finding that is in line with previous studies (Young et al., 2010). In addition, the moderating effect of market availability on food customization and food neophilia was insignificant. The possible explanation for this is that novel foods that are allowed to be customized by consumers in mHealth apps are often guaranteed to be available, so consumers do not have to consider the degree of market availability.

Fifth, with the use of fsQCA, we identified three configurations that led to high food neophilia among consumers. Configurations 1, 2, and 3 all emphasize the indispensable role of food novelty, which is consistent with H3, further confirming the reliability of the PLS-SEM hypothesis testing. Additionally, the PLS-SEM analysis indicated that market availability does not significantly moderate the relationship between food customization and food neophilia. Configuration 2 shows that when market availability is combined with food customization and food novelty, a synergistic effect can be generated, leading to high food neophilia. This finding complements the results of the PLS-SEM analysis. Moreover, the three configurations derived in this study reveal that high food neophilia is formed through the interaction of factors such as food customization, food guidance, food novelty, and market availability. This helps to better understand the formation of food neophilia among consumers.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

Based on technology affordance theory, our study reveals the formation mechanism of consumer food neophilia and its influential role in the context of mHealth apps. This research offers valuable theoretical and practical implications.

In terms of contribution to theory, this study offers a few interesting contributions. First, this study extends the technology affordance theory to the context of mHealth apps. We specifically chose two affordances of mHealth apps that are relevant to the context of food consumption, namely, food customization and food guidance. While prior work has explored general technological features (Pee, 2018), we precisely identify how these specific affordances of mHealth apps shape user behavior in the context of novel food discovery and adoption. By articulating how these affordances enable consumers to match preferences better and enhance their experience, we provide a more granular understanding of how digital tools can meet complex consumer demands in a health and food context.

Second, this study unveils the digitally driven formation mechanism of food neophilia. This study contributes by explaining the formation mechanism of consumer food neophilia, a personality trait often explored through demographic or cultural lenses (Okumus et al., 2021). By affirming the positive effect of mHealth apps' technological affordances and food novelty characteristics on food neophilia, we bridge the gap between digital technology and a fundamental human psychological orientation towards new foods. Our findings demonstrate that mHealth apps, through their affordances (customization, guidance) and the resulting exposure to perceived food novelty, actively stimulate and foster neophilia. This moves beyond traditional antecedents by offering a technology-driven pathway to cultivate an openness to new food experiences, revealing a novel mechanism for the formation and enhancement of neophilia in the digital age. Third, we also identify market availability as a critical boundary condition for growing consumers' neophilia. The results of this study reveal that market availability is an essential moderator in the manifestation of food neophilia and its related antecedents. We found that the positive influences of perceived food novelty and food guidance in shaping consumers' purchase intentions are significantly strengthened when market availability is high. This highlights that while mHealth apps can cultivate a desire for new foods, the ability of consumers to act on this desire is heavily contingent upon the practical reality of product accessibility. This finding enriches the theoretical understanding of the *conditions* under which digitally influenced food attitudes translate into behavioral outcomes, adding nuance to the existing literature on neophilia and consumer decision-making.

6.3 Practical Implications

In terms of implications for practice, this study offers actionable insights for various stakeholders. First, the result of this study offers insight for the optimized development of mHealth apps. To effectively drive novel food adoption, apps should prioritize strengthening and refining food customization and guidance functionalities. For customization, this means moving beyond static preferences to implement dynamic and intelligent customization features. For example, offering "daily" or "monthly" tailored plans based on real-time dietary records, exercise data, and evolving health conditions. For food guidance, apps can leverage consumer health monitoring data to intelligently push relevant guidance services and provide real-time, actionable food purchasing suggestions, directly empowering users with timely and personalized information. Second, the results of this study provide information about novel food promotion strategies. Our research offers actionable strategies for novel food developers and marketers grappling with the "omnivore's paradox"—consumers' simultaneous desire for new tastes and concerns about safety. By demonstrating that mHealth app affordances help consumers perceive food novelty and cultivate food neophilia, this study provides a clear pathway for promotion. Novel food developers should actively leverage mHealth app platforms as a primary channel to promote their products. They can focus on providing rich, verifiable information through app guidance and enabling customization features that allow consumers to engage with the food virtually. This strategy can directly enhance consumers' perception of novel food features and strengthen their inherent food neophilia, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful market adoption of new products.

7. Conclusions and Limitations

Based on the technology affordance theory, this study developed a research model on the formation of consumers' food neophilia and its impact on mHealth apps' technology affordance. The findings of this paper enrich the theoretical research on the mechanisms of technology affordance and food neophilia formation and provide practical guidance for the development of mHealth apps.

We also acknowledge the limitations of our study. First, our model focuses on a particular set of internal psychological constructs (food novelty, food neophilia) and immediate external influences directly related to app functionalities (food customization, food guidance) and market conditions (market availability). We recognize that consumer purchase intention and neophilia are complex phenomena influenced by a broader array of environmental factors, informational sources, and individual differences beyond the scope of this study. These may include, but are not limited to, general media exposure, social influence, peer recommendations, personal health beliefs, socio-economic status, cultural norms, and prior positive or negative experiences with novel foods. While our study aims to isolate the effects of the specified variables, future research could enrich our understanding by incorporating a more comprehensive set of external influences and control variables to provide a more holistic view of novel food adoption. Second, this paper used a cross-sectional questionnaire survey that can only study users' perceptions of mHealth apps at a certain point in time, as well as their evaluations of novel foods. Future research could obtain data from more time points to study the dynamic impact of the technical affordance of MHealth apps on the formation of consumer food neophilia.

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