

Preferences for Food Culture, Knowledge, and Lifestyle on Malaysian Islands Among Tourists: An Examination of Culinary Traditions

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Abstract: *This research aims to ascertain the correlation between culinary culture, lifestyle, expertise, and visitors' preferences for Malaysian Heritage cuisine on Pulau Tioman and Pulau Perhentian. This research is to determine the culinary traditions, skills, and lifestyle factors that impact visitors' choices in the Malaysian Islands. Tourist destinations have a significant role in attracting many people to a certain place. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the historical background and purpose of MHF in presenting the varied culinary culture of Malaysia to tourists that visit the Malaysian islands. A preliminary quantitative phase was conducted with a sample size of 351 participants. This phase focused on exploring the independent variables of food culture, lifestyle, and knowledge. Strong statistical associations have been identified between food culture and authentic Malaysian heritage food such as looking into the ethnicity, level of education, gender, and age. The culinary heritage of Malaysia, passed down through generations, has made MHF a worldwide famous cuisine. A distinctive and ambitious culinary cultural identity should offset the similarities of Malaysian cuisine with adjacent countries.*

Keywords: Malaysian Food Heritage (MFH), Food Culture, Knowledge, Lifestyle

1. Introduction

Malaysia has effectively established itself as a culinary haven, while being a multi-ethnic country. The word is not coincidental; it was invented due to the synergistic influence created by the amalgamation of several ethnic groups. Moreover, the country is enriched by the culinary heritage it shares with neighboring nations and regions. Despite rapid modernization, the country is nevertheless able to retain its rich cultural heritage.

Malaysia's status as one of the rare destinations showcasing a blend of flavors and variety of traditional food exemplifies the renowned slogan "Malaysia, Truly Asia" (Raji, 2017). Malaysia is among the few nations where such phenomena may be seen. The term "Malaysian Heritage Food" (MHF) refers to a collection of three distinct culinary traditions and techniques that have their origins in the amalgamation of the three primary ethnic groups that now reside in Malaysia (Omar, 2018).

Although the cuisine, language, and clothes of the Peranakan Chinese have been substantially impacted by Malaysian culture because of intermarriage and cultural adaptation, it is possible

to say that the Peranakan Chinese are the most well-known and remembered of the unique ethnic and cultural mix that exists in Peninsular Malaysia (Chien, 2016).

According to the Department of Survey and Mapping of Malaysia, the country is comprised of a total of 878 offshore islands. Tioman Island is made up of eight different communities, including Tekek village, Sanglang village, Juara village, Genting village, and Mukut village, among numerous other settlements. In addition to the fact that they continue to adhere to the traditional way of life, the villages have not yet adopted modern technologies. To this day, the educational system is not yet fully formed, and the population of children in this area is quite low.

The most surprising thing, however, is that most of the youngsters can communicate extremely effectively in English since they were exposed to people from other countries at a younger age. There were no convenience shops like 7-Eleven or Family Mart because there were none. A restaurant, a tiny café, and dining in the village were the only options available. According to Encik Sani, the Grand Manager of Juara Mutiara Resort, the amenities on these two islands are not comparable to those found in Langkawi and Penang. Many villages warungs and regular food shops can be found in this area.

There are two primary islands that make up the island of Perhentian: Perhentian Besar and Perhentian Kecil. "Kampung Nelayan" is the name of another settlement that can be found on the island of Perhentian. To provide the inhabitants and residents of Pulau Perhentian with the most convenient location possible, here is where the school, police station, clinic, and other facilities are situated. Additionally, it is important to note that there is a fire display at this location, which serves as an attraction for visitors who come adjacent to the store that offers a range of foods, although the selection is not as extensive as it is on the mainland.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Malaysian Heritage Food

Cultural heritage has a crucial role in comprehending life, serving as a significant component of social identity and a catalyst for promoting peace and mutual understanding (Barghi, 2017). Inheritance pertains to the transfer of what has been inherited. Cultural and natural heritage refers to the enduring legacy of our forebears that has been transmitted throughout history and has the potential to be inherited by future generations. Heritage cuisine has garnered attention and acclaim from as a cultural phenomenon and from visitors as a novel culinary encounter. Heritage cuisine is characterized by two significant inherent quality features: safety and authenticity. Traditional culinary meals prepared in food service companies must meet certain standards to guarantee their safety and authenticity (Almansouri, 2021).

Malaysia's cultural legacy is characterized by its originality, distinctiveness, and vibrancy, including a diverse range of indigenous cuisines originating from different races and ethnicities (Ismail, 2021). Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF) is the official culinary dish of Malaysia, symbolizing the lifestyle, culture, and heritage of a diverse community (Omar, 2018). The Malaysian population has a collective appreciation for the ethnic cuisine of the nation, although variations in beliefs, culture, and religion.

Malaysian cuisine is renowned for its distinctive delicacies such as beef rendang, laksa, nasi lemak, and tapai. Undoubtedly, Malay cuisine is characterized by its consistent use of spices, both in its preparation and cooking techniques, as well as the abundance and use of crucial

elements such as herbs and natural spices (Raji, 2017). Hence, food might be considered essential for certain groups or communities residing in a particular area as an integral component of their cultural legacy.

2.2 Food Culture

In the context of cultivation, production, procurement, cooking, eating, serving, and celebration of food, the term "food culture" refers to the habits, rituals, practices, belief systems, values, lifestyles, traditions, and customs that are associated with the cultivation, production, and food. A considerable influence on culinary culture may be attributed to a variety of factors, including but not limited to the following: family history, genealogy, heritage, and ethnicity; geographical differences; climate; and social and political events, such as poverty and violence. Malay-Chinese and Malay-Indian cuisines, for instance, are characterized by the presence of flavors and dishes that are exclusive to Malaysia and cannot be found in China or India, the countries from whence the ethnic minorities originate.

In addition to the traditional and contemporary meals of various ethnic groups, diverse cuisines have affected each other gastronomically throughout the course of time. They have also adapted local ingredients and flavors via an intercultural process, which has resulted in the creation of hybrid dishes that are genuinely transcultural and Malaysian. Food, more than any other factor, has been a significant factor in bringing together all Malaysians throughout the course of the years (Perry, 2017).

2.3 Lifestyle

Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean, and Bruneian Malay cuisine is characterized by its similarity originating from a common root. Malay food must adhere to halal standards. Malay cuisine is characterized by its distinctiveness, however it has been influenced by many different culinary traditions including Arabic, Indonesian, Thai, Portuguese, Chinese, and Indian (Raji, 2017). The Malays are an ethnic group of Austronesian descent residing in the Alam Malay region, encompassing the Malay Peninsula, eastern Sumatra, southern Thailand, the southern coast of Burma, the island of Singapore, the coast of Borneo (including Brunei), west Kalimantan, Sarawak, Sabah, and the scattered islands within this region.

Women in Malay culture are primarily responsible for contributing to information, practices, and shared beliefs in their traditions. Historically, Malay kitchens used "Lesung batu" (mortar and pestle) and "batu giling" (stone hand grinder constructed from stone) as conventional tools for food preparation. In contrast to contemporary appliances like blenders and food processors, stone mortars and millstones are said to provide a distinctive flavor to culinary recipes (Omar, 2015).

It is often assumed that the grinder only pulverizes the contents to a uniform consistency, without eliminating the oil and taste of the ingredients like conventional stone mortars do. Most Malay main courses are accompanied with rice, a shared culinary staple in many other Asian nations like Indonesia, Thailand, Brunei, and the Philippines. Due to its significant contribution of about 50% to Malaysia's rice consumption, the state of Kedah is often known as the nation's "rice bowl" or "rice source". In their 2017 study, Raji et al. identified Nasi Lemak (steamed rice with coconut milk and pandan leaves) as the most renowned rice dish in Malay cuisine. Nasi Lemak is widely regarded as the quintessential national dish and is often eaten during the morning meal.

2.4 Knowledge

The changes in consumer lifestyles and the ways in which they consume food have been a significant factor in the growth of the functional food business in Malaysia. According to Ramli (2017), there is a lack of information about whether or not consumers in Malaysia are already familiar with functional foods. In today's world, there are not a lot of young people who are aware of Food Heritage, and a lot of young people would rather purchase it online than learn how to cook it. According to Sharif (2016), the acquisition of knowledge about the creation of culinary legacy may be accomplished via the use of word of mouth, hands-on activities, observation, and the consumption of food that has been taught to the younger generation by the older generation to be consumed solely.

By way of illustration, methods of food preparation, techniques, and cultural beliefs that were handed down from subsequent generations are transmitted via the transmission of culinary methods, techniques, and recipes. When taking into consideration the fact that every culture, ethnic group, or place has its own distinct traditions and dietary habits, it is possible to comprehend the significance of culinary knowledge, particularly in relation to traditional cuisine (Sharif, 2016).

According to Yildirim et al. (2023), some eating practices are related with religious rites, while others reflect ethnic cultural norms. The findings of this research are an addition to the existing body of knowledge on the identification of culinary heritage. Furthermore, it may function as a measuring tool for the legacy Department, which is in the process of developing innovative approaches to teaching the public about the culinary legacy of the nation.

3. Issues and Problem

The commodification of Malaysian heritage cuisine in the tourism sector may result in cultural appropriation, when traditional meals are altered or misrepresented to suit the preferences of tourists. This technique has the potential to weaken the genuineness of the meal, depriving it of its cultural importance and turning it into a simple commodity. For visitors, this implies that their encounter with Malaysian cuisine may be shallow, devoid of the profound intricacy and genuineness that arises from consuming the dish in its original state. These changes not only impact their comprehension of Malaysian culinary culture but also contribute to the degradation of cultural heritage as customary practices are modified or eradicated to accommodate tourist tastes.

In addition, the insufficient availability of information is one of the significant obstacles to a more profound understanding of Malaysian heritage cuisine among travelers. Tourists who are interested in learning about the local cuisine may encounter difficulties in obtaining this information, particularly in more remote island regions where resources are scarce. Tourists are unable to make informed decisions regarding their culinary experiences because of this information divide, which diminishes the educational value of their visit.

This lack of knowledge results in a homogenized experience, as tourists tend to favor familiar cuisines, thereby overlooking the chance to investigate the complete range of the local culinary culture. The potential for cultural exchange and comprehension is also diminished by the absence of awareness, as cuisine is a powerful medium for sharing and preserving cultural heritage.

4. Research Framework & Hypothesis

Figure 1 is the proposed framework for the study of Malaysian Heritage Food: tourist preferences on food culture, knowledge, and lifestyle in Malaysian Islands.

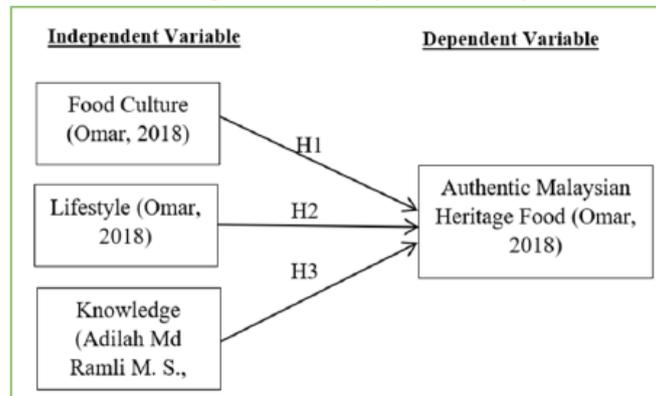


Figure 1: Research Framework (Adapted from Omar (2018))

The following refers to the hypotheses that are created from the theoretical framework:

H1: Food culture has a positive relationship with Malaysian Heritage Food

H2: Lifestyle has a positive relationship on Malaysian Heritage Food

H3: Knowledge has a positive relationship on Malaysian Heritage Food

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Participant

The research target demographic comprises both local and international visitors who visit the islands of Tioman Island and Perhentian Island in Malaysia. Local tourists who visited Tioman and Perhentian islands comprised the sampling populations for this investigation. The objective is to accumulate 400 respondents and manage to accumulate 351 respondents.

5.2 Research Design

To collect the quantitative data for this study the survey method for 1-2 months. Due to the survey method's affordability, suitability for this study, the kind of data required for this study, population characteristics, and resource availability, it was chosen. The researcher administered the survey instrument because of providing representative information timely, cost effective and confidentially. Questionnaires were developed using Google Form and randomly distributed through QR code and email. Google Form links were also given through online platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

5.3 Research Instrumentation

The researchers also consider the disadvantages of survey instruments like low response rate, difficulty in reading questionnaires and difficulty for researchers to understand the response. The questionnaire is a written question set design in which the respondent documents their response using moderately defined alternatives. Its purpose is to assess the areas of concern addressed by the framework, objective, and research question. All study variables will be evaluated using a seven-point Likert scale (1-extremely disagree; 7-extremely agree). The accuracy of the scale was evaluated.

5.4 Data Collection

The UiTM Faculty Ethics Review Committee verified the survey questionnaire for content validation, a quantitative research expert for item scale validation, and a language expert for language and translation validation, which was done for both English and Malay. After receiving ethics approval, the questionnaire was distributed to the respondent. Responses were collected for four weeks or more, and data were entered into SPSS for analysis.

6. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the descriptive variables of the respondents in this study about tourist preferences towards food culture, lifestyle, and knowledge in Malaysian Islands. Based on table 2, the results of the demographic characteristics of the respondents about the preferences of tourists towards food culture, lifestyle, and knowledge in the Malaysian Islands.

6.1 Demographic profile of participants

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	185	52.7
Male	166	47.3
Age		
19 - 20	10	2.8
21 - 30	272	77.5
31 - 40	44	12.5
41 and above	21	6.0
Below 18	4	1.1
Occupation		
Government	37	10.5
Non-government	147	41.9
Others	54	15.4
Students	113	32.2
Level of Study		
Sarjana Muda	165	47.0
Diploma	89	25.4
Others	40	11.4
SPM	30	8.5
STPM	27	7.7
Frequency of traveling		
1 - 2 times	159	45.3
3 - 4 times	99	28.2
5 - 6 times	33	9.4
7 - 8 times	16	4.6
More than 8 times	44	12.5

The survey revealed that most respondents were female, accounting for 185 individuals (52.7%), while male respondents accounted for 166 (18.3%). Furthermore, the study revealed that the age group of 21-30 years accounted for most respondents, totaling 272 individuals (77.5%). Conversely, the age group of 31-40 years had 44 respondents, representing 12.5% of the total. The proportion of respondents aged 41 and above is 21 (6.0%), whilst the proportion of respondents aged 19 - 20 is 10 (2.8%).

One further demographic characteristic is the respondents' profession, which reveals that most respondents are non-government workers, accounting for 147 individuals (41.9%), followed by students, totaling 113 individuals (32.2%). Regarding the occupation government, it received the lowest number of surveys, 37 (10.5%), in contrast to the other governments which recorded 54 respondents (15.4%).

A significant proportion of the participants in this poll had a degree, namely 165 respondents (47.0%). Diploma holders accounted for 89 respondents (25.4%), while 40 respondents (11.4%) reported other levels of study, 30 respondents (8.5%) reported SPM, and 27 respondents (7.7%) reported STPM. The travel frequency of the majority is 1 - 2 times, reporting 159 respondents (45.3%). This is followed by 3 - 4 times with 99 respondents (28.2%), 5 - 6 times with 33 respondents (9.4%), 7 - 8 times with 16 respondents (4.6%), and more than 8 times with 44 respondents (12.5%).

6.2 Discussion

The aim of this research is to investigate the correlation between food culture, lifestyle, and visitors' awareness of their preferences for Malaysian Heritage Food in Tioman Island and Perhentian Island. The present analysis establishes a robust positive correlation between food culture and the culinary history of Malaysia (H1). Hence, it is essential to include culinary culture into the daily lives of everyone in Malaysia, irrespective of their religious or ethnic background, in order to prevent the obsolescence of Malaysian traditional cuisine.

Despite its remote location from the metropolitan area and mainland, it is crucial to prepare a small portion of the traditional cuisine to facilitate its introduction and retention by the visitors in attendance, while also catering to their preferences. Furthermore, the culinary lifestyle is a paramount concern for visitors visiting Malaysian Heritage Food on the island of Malaysia. An exemplary lifestyle, such as the one passed down through generations within the Malay community, stands as a prime example of excellent health and well-being. Indeed, lifestyle plays a crucial role in ensuring the attainment of desired outcomes in any given situation.

Moreover, a commendable way of life will be emulated since it will provide considerable advantages. The research also indicates that visitors prioritize knowledge about cuisine when it comes to Malaysian Heritage cuisine on Malaysian islands. Therefore, it is essential that information be present to ensure that it does not influence any activity. For instance, having knowledge about food will provide advantages since it enables users to choose what to consume and vice versa. One can ascertain the inclination of visitors towards the understanding of Malaysian Heritage Food on the Malaysian islands.

The conclusions of this study are substantiated by all the known research aims, independent factors, and dependent variables.

7. Limitation

Despite the rich and diverse culinary heritage of Malaysian islands, travelers are unable to completely investigate and appreciate these traditions due to several constraints. The absence of cognizance and information is a substantial constraint. The profundity and diversity of Malaysian cuisine are often unfamiliar to many travelers, and there is often a lack of guidance or resources to educate them about local culinary culture. Their capacity to make informed dining decisions and engage with authentic culinary experiences is restricted by this knowledge divide.

Accessibility is an additional constraint. Certain traditional dishes are either unique to specific regions or are prepared with ingredients that may not be readily available on the islands, particularly in remote areas. This results in a more restricted and potentially distorted culinary experience by limiting travelers' exposure to the complete range of Malaysian heritage cuisines. The situation is further complicated by language barriers. It may be difficult for tourists to comprehend the ingredients and preparation methods of traditional dishes or communicate with local vendors. This can lead to a reluctance to attempt unfamiliar dishes, thereby diminishing their overall cultural immersion.

Furthermore, health and dietary preferences present a challenge. Many tourists have specific dietary requirements or preferences that may not be in accordance with traditional Malaysian foods. Consequently, they opt for international or fusion cuisine, thereby forfeiting authentic culinary experiences. Finally, tourists may be discouraged from visiting local street cuisine and small establishments due to their perceived hygiene and safety concerns, which are frequently the most authentic sources of Malaysian flavors. These constraints collectively impede travelers' ability to completely engage with and appreciate the culinary traditions of Malaysian islands, thereby influencing their overall cultural experience.

8. Conclusion

In summary, Malaysia is currently experiencing substantial challenges in the preservation of its truly authentic cultural values. As a result of the hybridization of Malaysian cuisine, MHF has lost its distinctive cultural, ethnic, and aesthetic characteristics. This matter needs significant attention, particularly if the authenticity and originality of MHF are to be maintained. Malaysian cuisine is quite like that of its adjacent nations, such as Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Indonesia, and Indonesia, in terms of fundamental materials, tastes and flavors, culinary methods, and preparation methods. This is a prime illustration of how the acculturation of cultures can result in inaccurate assumptions and perceptions of Malaysian cuisine.

The dishes of MHF were distinguished from those of other countries by the availability of local ingredients. It is imperative to preserve the MHF cuisine to transmit this knowledge to future generations. All in all, the investigation into the culinary culture, lifestyle, and knowledge MHF has successfully established a positive relationship with visitors on the Malaysian Island.

This research contributes to the public's comprehension and knowledge of culinary heritage identity. The Department of Heritage may also employ it as a measurement instrument to develop a new strategy for educating the public about National Food Heritage. Numerous enticing findings may be obtained through future investigations of various states in Malaysia. Finally, the study's findings were limited to the gender category, which may not accurately represent the entire demographic landscape. It may suggest the use of additional variables, including age, educational background, and ethnicity, to achieve more beneficial outcomes.

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