Unravelling International Students' Preferences in Embracing Malaysian Cuisine: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

This pilot study aims to investigate the preferences of international students in embracing Malaysian cuisine during their tenure at local university. Students frequently experience difficulties in their social and academic environments. No study has been explored on the relationship between students' views and perceptions of Malaysian food. The objective of this study is to precede further studies on key factors that influence international students' preferences for Malaysian cuisine that may perhaps provide insights for universities and local food establishments to promote more of Malaysian cuisine internationally. The pilot study was conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur branch, which consist of a significant number of undergraduate and postgraduate international students. Kuala Lumpur has many options for type of restaurants and varieties of local cuisine. The research instrument used in this study is a self-administered questionnaire, that was validated and distributed to only international students. The study employed a quantitative method approach to understand the factors influencing the food choices of international students, towards Malaysian cuisine. The questionnaire developed includes demographic information, followed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) sections, (i) attitude, (ii) subjective norms and (iii) perceived behavioural control. The findings of this pilot do prove that attitudes, social norm and perceived behavioural control had a significant positive effect on intention to consume Malaysian food with attitudes playing the main factor. The quality, taste and cultural background of the food product are the drivers that led them to consume local cuisine. This study has provided valuable insights for further research and the development of strategies to cater to the culinary preferences of international students in UTM Kuala Lumpur especially. The findings thus far could provide insights for local food establishments to enhance the promotion of Malaysian cuisine to international students, to potentially increase the demand for local foods and boost the industry's revenue.

Keywords: International students, intention, Malaysia, food, culture, taste

■ 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Food is an essential element that influences the development of a society and progress of an individual. In the realm of dietary regulations, flavour is a crucial aspect for liking a certain dish which is a prioritization to Malaysians that is rich and displays a vibrant food culture. Malaysia is a multicultural Southeast Asian country, composed of Malays, Chinese and Indians, from different cultural backgrounds. Malaysia's multi-ethnic society and strategic location as a traffic centre along the Strait of Malacca have fostered a diverse range of cuisines and specialties, blending Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European influences, among others. Malaysia's unique tropical climate and multicultural heritage have fostered a diverse range of cuisines and specialties, blending Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European influences, among others (Mohamad et al., 2023: Syed Mohamed, 2018). Malaysia's unique tropical climate and multicultural heritage have fostered a diverse range of cuisines and specialties, blending Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European influences, among others.

With an understanding of food, people seek inspiration from taste buds through constant attempts. Malaysia food scene is a mixture of cultures, resulting in rich and vibrant selection of foods. According to a study by Tan and Khoo (2019), food is a significant part of Malaysia's tourist attraction, with a wide range of delicacies available at all times. Malaysian cuisine is known for its unique flavours and recipes, which offer a special experience for food enthusiasts. The dishes in Malaysia's cuisine vary depending on the celebratory seasons and location. Food in Malaysia is somewhat similar to food in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand, as the countries share many of the same dishes, heritage and ancestry.

Even the tropical local fruits in Malaysia are diverse, with some being seasonal and others available

throughout the year. Malaysia experiences hot weather conditions all year round, which allows for a wide variety of fruit types to grow in the country (Worldbank, n.d). The mean annual temperature in Malaysia is 25.4°C, with relatively little seasonal variability in average monthly temperature. The hottest months of the year are April, May, and June, with temperatures ranging from 24.9°C to 25.9°C. The night temperatures fluctuate around 23/25°C all year round. Malaysia also receives abundant rainfall throughout the year, with annual rainfall varying from 2,000mm to 2,500mm.

■ 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background

Malaysia was the highest country with inbound student numbers in year 2020 compared to other Southeast Asian countries (Chassie, Peck & Mackie, 2023). Malaysia was even ranked 13th largest destination for international students in the world on the same year. The country has gained recognition as a nation where people of all backgrounds, religions, and cultures coexist peacefully and harmoniously thus becoming a place to pursue education. Along with the background of the nation to attract international students, the characteristics of university is important as listed by Zakaria, Ahmad and Norzaidi (2009). According to the authors, a world class university need to have the twelve characteristics as listed; quality of faculty, research reputation, talented undergraduate, international presence, proper usage of resources, alliances and networks, choices of disciplines, technologically smart, practice good management, number of enrolments and international students registered, international awards from international institution, good governance and global recognition of graduates. All of the above-mentioned criteria are vital for the sustainability and development of a university, but it also depends on each customers' expectation and perception.

Nevertheless, Malaysia has become a nation for high inbound students for various reasons and benefits that include;

(i)   multicultural society, thus tolerance to foreign students (Chassie, Peck & Mackie, 2023; Al-Suraihi et al., 2020; Syed Mohamed, 2018). It is said that with this mix culture, the students tend to develop global competency, improve language proficiency, enhanced maturity, intellectual growth, and appreciative of other cultural diversity (Rahim et al., 2020; Popov et al., 2017; Baker, 2016).

(ii)   Malaysia has high calibre of the academic environment, residential facilities, state-of-the-art classrooms, research centres, co-working spaces, sports facilities, and more (Geibel, 2020).

(iii)   Compared to many Western countries, tuition fees and living expenses in Malaysia are relatively lower, making it an affordable option for students seeking quality education.

(iv)   Malaysia's strategic location within the Asia Pacific region is a gateway to diverse markets, offering international students potential job opportunities and valuable international exposure (Mohamad et al., 2023).

(v)   Majority of courses in Malaysia are conducted in English, that facilitates a smoother transition for international students (Mohamad et al., 2023).

(vi)   Malaysia's growing economy and thriving industries create excellent employment prospects for students who wish to work in the country after completing their education (Amzat et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, studies have demonstrated that international students do encounter some difficulties or challenges throughout their educational journey, such as struggle to understand a new language and adapt to different culture, ambiguity or uncertainty with the new academic system and ICT literacy in general (Hussain & Shen, 2019). Nonetheless, Malaysia's rich cultural heritage, affordability, strategic location, world-class education system, and growing economy makes it an attractive destination for international students to pursue education.

This said, the highest number of inbound students to Malaysia in 2020 was China with 16974 students, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, Yemen, Pakistan, Nigeria and India. The factors identified were geographic proximity, culture, religion, and linguistic similarities, and relative affordability. This is in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2007- 2020 (NHESP) that comprises of an plan action to establish Malaysia as a global centre for superior higher education. NHESP was then followed by the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 (MEBHE) which is a major policy document driving reform to spur the Malaysian higher education towards excellence that benchmark Malaysian student performance against international norms (Bush, et al., 2018; MOHE, 2015).

2.2 Malaysian Cuisine

There are no specific references on inbound or international students' preferences on local cuisine, but research on tourist dining preferences has shown that the quality dimensions considered most important by tourists are reliability, tangibles, courtesy, competence, and credibility (Vu, Li, Law, & Zhang, 2019; MAC,

2018). International or inbound students' preferences on local cuisine may be influenced by factors such as cultural background, personal taste, and availability of options. However domestic students generally have a positive view of studying alongside international students, although some raise concerns over the impact on their academic experience.

Malaysia has been recognized as one of the best food practitioners in the world (Nahar et al., 2018). Documentary programmes and cooking competitions media have somehow contributed to the globalization of Malaysian national cuisine. Among the world-famous chef from Malaysia that is internationally known is Chef Wan. Even international British celebrity chef and restaurateur Gordon Ramsay is an had the opportunity to explore Malaysian dish which are rendang, satay, and laksa. The well-known tourism slogan "Malaysia truly Asia" is a key indicator of the multiracial society that shapes Malaysian food. Malay, Indian, Chinese, Thai, and Arab cuisines were all peacefully and tolerantly combined to create unique Malaysian cuisines that are rich in in food produce and enhanced with the herbs and spices that Asian nations are known for.

Nevertheless, Malaysian national cuisines are still unknown to many international communities. Hence, this paper aims to examine international students' intention to consume Malaysian food as part of determining the taste buds of non-citizens food preferences. Hence, this leads to the objectives of the study whereby it aimed to determine international student' attitude, intentions and perceived for Malaysian cuisine.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This paper is grounded on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) to address the effect of social media on the students' academic performance at Red Sea University. UGT is one of most distinguished theories in the research field of communication and mass communication studies (Weiyan, 2015). mass media platforms and their audience to find out how they influence each other. However, this study focuses on advanced technology social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Al-Jabri, Sohail, & Ndubisi, 2015).

This theory is one of the main theories that focused on consumer decision regarding the intention to consume food. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control was adapted and from where the variables for this study were acquired. Many researchers had successfully used TPB theory to investigate food preferences related behaviour and consumer behavioural intentions (Chan and Tsang, 2011; Beaulieu and Godin, 2011; Chan et al., 2011).

Overall, the TPB could predict and measure both successful and unsuccessful behaviour (Yazdanpanah & Forouzani, 2015). The theory aims to fully understand the relationship and influence of each variable. Thus, this study employed TPB framework to gain a better understanding of the international students' decision regarding the intention to consume food.
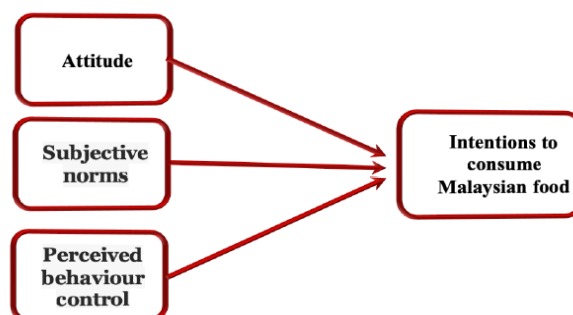

Figure 1: Theoretical framework grounded by TPB

This paper focuses on this relationship between the construct by concentrating on several variables, where student intensions to consume Malaysian food is the dependent variable. Further, the variables that influence the international student' consist of a number of independent variables such as Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Based on the literature review and theoretical framework (Figure 1) the hypotheses were formed:

■ 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section presents the methodology of the study. The study adopts a descriptive analytical method. This section provides a description of the population and the sample of the study. A questionnaire survey was adapted and developed based on various variables acquired from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control.

The questionnaire developed was divided into four sections with Section A focusing on the demographics. Section B, C and D however is focused on the Attitudes, Norm and Perceived behaviour towards consuming Malaysian local food. Each section has only 10 short questions each.

The total updated number of international students in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in June 2023 was 4987 and only 750 students are in Kuala Lumpur campus. However, this study focuses only on the data collected from international students at UTM Kuala Lumpur. Data were analysed using Statistical methods and SPSS software to address the objectives of this study.

■ 4.0 FINDINGS AND RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Profile

According to the data obtained, 32.43% of the respondents were female and 67.57% were male (Table 1). Overall, average age of the respondents were 20-25 years old, at 29.73%, 16.22% were 26-30 years old, 8.11% were 31-35 years old, 13.51% were 36- 40 years old, and 32.43% were over 40 years old. As for religion, Christianity accounted for 2.70%, Hinduism 8.11%, Islam 75.68%, and other religions accounted for 13.51%. As for education level, 21.62% of the respondents were doing a bachelor's degree, 51.35% are pursuing master's degree, and 27.03% is in the mission to obtain a doctoral degree (PhD).

Table 1: Frequency Analysis of Respondents

Profile	Options	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	32.43
	Male	67.57
Age	20-25	29.73
	26 - 30	16.22
	31 - 35	8.11
	36 - 40	13.51
	Above 40	32.43
Religion	Christian	2.70
	Hindu	8.11
	Islam	75.68
	Others	13.51
Education Level	Bachelor	21.62
	Master	51.35
	PhD	27.03

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis according to attitudes, social norm, perceived behavioural control and intention to consume Malaysian food

Variable Name	Minimum value	Maximum value	Standard deviation	Average value
Attitudes	2	5	0.658	3.686
Social Norm	1	5	0.892	2.976
Perceived Behavioural Control	1.4	5	0.814	3.808
Intention to consume Malaysian food	2	5	0.65	3.459

The mean value of the Attitudes variable is 3.686 with a standard deviation of 0.658, which indicates that the respondents have a moderately positive attitude towards Malaysian food in general, i.e. they have some recognition and preference for Malaysian food.

In the variable "Social Norm", the mean value is 2.976 and the standard deviation is 0.892, which indicates that the respondents' overall acceptance of Malaysian food by the surrounding society is low, i.e., the respondents

are less influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of the surrounding people towards the consumption of Malaysian food.

The mean value of the variable "Perceived Behavioural Control" is 3.808 with a standard deviation of 0.814, which indicates that the respondents have a high level of confidence and ability to control and implement their own consumption behaviour towards Malaysian food.

The mean value of the variable "Intention to consume Malaysian food" is 3.459 with a standard deviation of 0.65, which indicates that the respondents have a moderately positive tendency to consume Malaysian food in general.

4.3 Correlation Analysis

		Attitudes	Social Norm	Perceived Behavioural Control	Intention to consume Malaysian food
Attitudes	Correlation coefficient	1.000	0.503*	0.557***	0.827***
	p	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.000
Social Norm	Correlation coefficient	0.503**	1.000	0.227	0.734***
	p	0.002	0.000	0.177	0.000
Perceived Behavioural Control	Correlation coefficient	0.557***	0.227	1.000	0.618***
	p	0.000	0.177	0.000	0.000
Intention to consume Malaysian food	Correlation coefficient	0.827***	0.734***	0.618***	1.000
	p	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

The correlation coefficient between "Attitudes" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food" was 0.827 ($p < 0.001$), showing a high positive correlation.

The correlation coefficient between "Social Norm" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food" was 0.734 ($p < 0.001$), showing a high positive correlation.

The correlation coefficient between "Perceived Behavioural Control" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food" was 0.618 ($p < 0.001$), showing a moderate positive correlation.

There is a high positive correlation between "Attitudes" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food".

4.4 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Results of linear regression analysis (n=37)

	Unstandardized coefficient		t	p
	B	**Standard error**		
Constants	0.035	0.249	0.141	0.889
Attitude	0.451	0.085	5.287	0.000***
Social Norm	0.324	0.054	6.041	0.000***
Perceived Behavioural Control	0.210	0.061	3.425	0.002***
R^2	0.867			
Adjusted R^2	0.855			
F	F=71.630, p=0.000			
DW	1.678			

Dependent variable: Intention to consume Malaysian food
*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

According to the results of the linear regression analysis, the adjusted R^2 was 0.855, indicating that the regression model could explain 85.5% of the variability in the target variables. This indicates that the regression model has a good fit and can predict the respondents' consumption intention more accurately. The F-test is used to determine the regression effect of the regression model, i.e., to test whether the linear relationship between the

dependent variable and all independent variables is significant and can also be used to test the statistical significance of the model. From the results, F=71.630, p<0.001, the regression model is considered to have passed the F-test with a confidence level of 0.001, i.e., the fitted equation is statistically significant.

In the regression equation, the unstandardized coefficient of the variable "Attitudes" was 0.451 (p < 0.05), the unstandardized coefficient of the variable "Social Norm" was 0.324 (p < 0.01), and the unstandardized coefficient of the variable "Perceived Behavioural Control" was 0.210 (p < 0.01). This indicates that there is a significant positive effect of these variables on "Intention to consume Malaysian food".

The regression equation is: Intention to consume Malaysian food = 0.451*Attitudes + 0.324*Social Norm + 0.21*Perceived Behavioural Control.

■ 5.0 DISCUSSION

The gender distribution of the sample showed that 67.57% of the participants were male and 32.43% were female. It could be attributed to the fact that area more male international students registered in this campus. This outcome may yield important insights for pertinent marketing initiatives aimed at increasing the number of students.

Three quarters of the sample's respondents were over 40, suggesting that this age group has a greater demand for Malaysian food consumption based on age distribution. Furthermore, a sizable fraction of the sample's participants was between the ages of 20 and 30, which may indicate that younger people are more interested in a variety of food options. These findings may offer direction for target audience selection and positioning in marketing strategies. Islamists made up 75.68% of the sample when it came to religious beliefs, which may reflect how important Malaysian cuisine is to the Islamic community. This result could provide a reference for relevant companies to follow the Islamic food requirements in the product preparation and promotion process. This outcome may serve as a guide for relevant businesses to adhere to Islamic food regulations when preparing and promoting their products.

In terms of education level, 51.35% of the respondents in the sample had a master's degree, which is much higher than other education levels. The international students in UTM are those who are mainly pursuing their postgraduate study. This may imply that the respondents have high level of education and may have a deeper understanding of the quality and cultural background of Malaysian food products. This result could provide guidance to relevant companies in marketing and educating consumers.

In the descriptive statistics section, it can be concluded that the respondents' attitudes towards Malaysian food are overall positive, and they hold some recognition and preference towards it. However, the level of recognition of Malaysian food by the surrounding society is relatively low, i.e., the respondents are less influenced by the attitudes and behaviours of the surrounding people towards the consumption of Malaysian food. Respondents hold a high level of confidence and ability in their ability to control and implement their own consumption behaviour towards Malaysian food. Overall, the respondents hold a moderate positive tendency towards the willingness to consume Malaysian food.

In the correlation analysis section, the findings of respondents' attitudes towards Malaysian food are closely related to their willingness to consume. This means that by improving the respondents' attitudes towards Malaysian food, it can promote their intention to consume the food. There is also a high positive correlation between "Social Norm" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food", which indicates that there is a strong correlation between the social acceptance of Malaysian food in the respondents' surrounding society and their intention to consume it. This indicates that the social environment and the consumption behaviours of others have some influence on the respondents' intention to consume." The moderate positive correlation between "Perceived Behavioural Control" and "Intention to consume Malaysian food" indicates that the respondents' confidence and ability to control and implement their own consumption behaviour of Malaysian food is related to their willingness to consume. This indicates that increasing respondents' perceptions and confidence in their own ability can facilitate their willingness to consume Malaysian food.

In the regression analysis, we found that "Attitudes", "Social Norm" and "Perceived Behavioural Control" had a significant positive effect on "Intention to consume Malaysian food". Firstly, "Attitudes" has the greatest effect on intention to consume. This means that respondents' attitude towards Malaysian food is the main factor that determines their intention to consume. When respondents have positive attitude towards Malaysian food, they are more likely to show willingness to consume. This may be because a positive attitude will make the respondents identify with the quality, taste and cultural background of the food product, which in turn will lead them to be willing to consume it. Secondly, "Social Norm" also has a significant positive effect on willingness to consume. Social norm refers to the degree of approval of Malaysian food by people around them and the influence of their consumption behaviour on the respondents. Respondents are more likely to show willingness to

consume when they perceive that people around them have a high level of approval of Malaysian food and that it is commonly consumed by people around them. This may be due to the fact that social norms are normative and influential on the behaviour of individuals, and respondents are guided by the behaviour and attitudes of those around them. Finally, "Perceived Behavioural Control" also has a significant positive effect on consumption intentions. Perceived Behavioural Control refers to the respondents' confidence and ability to control and implement their own consumption behaviour of Malaysian food. Respondents were more likely to show willingness to consume when they had a higher perception of their own ability and believed that they could easily perform the consumption of the food item. This may be because an individual's perception of his or her own ability affects his or her confidence and decision making about the behaviour and thus his or her willingness to consume.

■ 6.0 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this article provides an overview of Malaysia's cuisine in attracting diverse population in local food consumption. By highlighting the intention and preferences of international students in a local university to consume local dish, it may be an eye opener to promote and enhance the appreciation of Malaysian food among diverse and broader audiences. The findings contribute to cross-cultural understanding while emphasizing the importance of promoting Malaysia's rich and unique culinary heritage.

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