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Acceptance of Korean Food Culture among Young Generations in Malaysia: Health and Authentic Taste Perspectives

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Abstract: The Korean Wave, also known as Hallyu, has significantly impacted global culture, and has affected people around the world. This influence has also become a trend in Malaysia, where Korean cultural products are widely embraced, especially by the younger generation. The authenticity of Korean flavors is essential for maintaining its unique culinary identity while health-conscious markets around the world have led to a surge in demand for Korean food Therefore, this study aims to assess the consumer acceptance of Korean food in Malaysia, particularly in Sungai Petani, Kedah, and Pulau Pinang. The Korean Wave, which represents the global popularity of South Korean culture since the 2000s, has exerted a considerable influence on various cultural aspects, including cuisine. Through a quantitative survey, data were collected from 150 participants in the northern area, specifically targeting Generations Y and Z through convenience sampling. The collected data was then analyzed for descriptive statistics, and the correlation to test the hypotheses. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between consumer acceptance of Korean food, health perspectives, and authentic taste variables. The findings of this study suggest that increased exposure to Korean culture through the Korean Wave boosts consumer acceptance and purchase intentions for Korean food culture in Malaysia. This information is valuable for marketers and restaurateurs seeking to capture the growing demand for Korean cuisine. This study offers a localized perspective on the global phenomenon of Korean cultural influence and provides practical recommendations for future research.

Keywords: *Consumer acceptance, Korean food, Culture, Health Perspective, Authentic taste*

1. Introduction

The Korean Wave, or Hallyu, refers to the global popularity of South Korean culture, which began to spread in East Asia and has since spread worldwide. This phenomenon encompasses various elements of Korean pop culture, including music, movies, fashion, cosmetics, and cuisine (Hanaki, Singhal, Han, Kim, & Chitnis, 2007). Since 2002, Malaysia has actively participated in this cultural trend (Cho, 2010). Growing interest in Korean society and culture has spurred Malaysians to learn the Korean language and explore Korean food, which has become increasingly popular.

The Korean Wave's influence in Malaysia began with the "Winter Sonata" broadcast in 2002, leading to a broader acceptance of Korean pop culture. The show's theme song, rebranded in Malay as "Sonata Musim Salju" and performed by Hazami, topped the Malaysian music charts. Korean music (K-pop) has also gained a substantial following among Malaysian teenagers and young adults, especially at concerts such as I.Seoul.U Concert featuring K-pop artists at the KL Convention Center attracting 6000 fans (New Straits Times, 2017). Korean food popularity in Malaysia has been bolstered by TV shows like "Running Man," which often feature Korean cuisine. The show has a significant following, with 6,000 fans attending a fan meeting in Malaysia in 2017 (The Star, 2017). Additionally, Korean cultural events such as the Korean Lifestyle Road Show 2016 and K-Food Fair have further exposed Malaysians to Korean culture, lifestyle, and culinary traditions.

Asian cuisine, particularly Korean cuisine, has been attracting increasing attention worldwide. Consumers are drawn to Korean cuisine due to its perceived uniqueness and nutritional value compared to other Asian food options (Ha & Jang, 2009). Kim and Sim (2017) observed that the main reason for the increase in the positive perception of Korean food among consumers was the influence of Korean dramas and movies streaming in Malaysia. Based on Jobst (2023), a global survey conducted in 2022 on South Korean cultural content among select countries found that Korean food was highly popular among Malaysian respondents, with over 68% reporting that Korean food was popular in their country. This can be seen by the mushrooming of outlets based in Korea, such as Kyochon 1991, Seoul Garden, Myeondong Topokki, and K-Fry, with halal certification. Jobst

(2022) also stated that the most preferred Korean food worldwide is Korean fried chicken, followed by kimchi, bibimbap, bulgogi, and tteokbokki. Nahar et al., (2018) also revealed that some of the most popular Korean dishes in Malaysia include kimchi, ramen, chigae, chimek, and samgyupsal. Furthermore, according to Astuti and Asih (2021), Korean food has gained popularity worldwide because of its diverse range of dishes and robust flavors. Korean cuisine, which includes dishes like bibimbap and kimchi, has captured the attention of many foodies all over the world and has helped Korean cuisine become more widely accepted (Mujani et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, Korean cuisine has expanded, especially in Kuala Lumpur (Akbarruddin, 2020). With a strong preference for spicy cuisine, Malaysians have influenced the Korean restaurant industry to focus on meeting customers' desires by providing a diverse selection of spicy dishes (Mon and Pil, 2017; Chee & Yazdanifard, 2021). Local Malaysians have a strong interest in the variety of Korean cuisines and the culture they represent. Due to its growing popularity, Korean food faces widespread acceptance in Asia. It is known for its health benefits, featuring low-calorie dishes containing whole grains, vegetables, seafood, meat, and fish (Min, 2009). In addition to health perceptions, the halal label on a restaurant is getting the attention of Malaysian consumers, especially Muslim consumers (Buang et. al, 2018). There has been an increased awareness of the halal status of oriental foods, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cuisines. Therefore, more attention must be paid to the halal integrity of Korean foods (Mohd Amin et.al, 2020). Meanwhile, food is a powerful symbol of cultural identity and can influence social status and tourism (Frochot, 2003; Sims, 2009). Therefore, the preservation and authenticity of traditional Korean flavors are essential for maintaining their unique culinary identity. Moreover, the ease of making Korean dishes, accessible in a supermarket, with their nutritional value and unique flavors, positions Korean food as both practical and appealing to a global audience. This demonstrates how the traditional culinary practices of Korea resonate with contemporary food trends and consumer preferences.

This study examines how ethnic authenticity and health influence customer acceptance intentions. Although the popularity of the Korean Wave has been increasing in Malaysia over time, there has been little attempt to conduct empirical or nonempirical research, particularly on the topics linked to customer satisfaction and the acceptability of healthy and authentic taste of Korean food in Malaysia. Consumer satisfaction and acceptance research on food consumption has generally focused on other cultural foods in Malaysia, such as Korean Japanese by Agus et al. (2018) which investigated how a Korean restaurant's ambiance influences repurchase intention. This study aims to examine how Malaysian consumers perceive Korean cuisine, with a particular emphasis on the Sungai Petani, Kedah, and Pulau Pinang regions. This research seeks to understand and further explore the factors (health and authentic flavors perspectives) that influence young generations of Malaysians' acceptance of the culture of Korean cuisine.

2. Literature Review

Overview of Korean Food in Malaysia

The relationship between food and tourism has been extensively examined in terms of various terminologies, such as food tourism, cuisine tourism, culinary tourism, and gastronomic tourism. Food is crucial for attracting international visitors to a country as a tourist destination. Long (2004) highlighted that countries leveraging their unique culinary offerings can enhance their tourism appeal by creating a distinctive gastronomic image. The awareness and appreciation of a country's culinary image have been identified as major components of a travel experience. Consequently, national, and local policies must effectively link food and tourism to actively foster food tourism as a key attraction (Long, 2004; Hwang et al., 2017). The success of such policies is evident in the case of Korean cuisine, where dishes like "kimchi" and "bulgogi" have piqued the interest of Malaysian visitors who seek to experience authentic Korean flavors (Hwang et al., 2017).

One of the standout successes in Korean cuisine is "bibimbap," which has gained international popularity because of its appealing presentation and unique taste profile (Shin & Jeong, 2015). The colorful vegetable and egg dish with red chili paste is visually appealing and flavourful and is loved by people worldwide. Long (2004) further explained that the combination of diverse ingredients provides a complex yet harmonious taste, making it a culinary highlight. In Korean cuisine, grilling and frying are not as commonly used methods, such as fermentation, boiling, grilling, seasoning, and pickles making. Among these options, fermentation is the most

favored because it not only enhances the flavors of the food but also helps preserve it for an extended period (Kim et al., 2016). A distinct characteristic of Korean food is its emphasis on fermentation, with "kimchi" being the most renowned example. Kimchi, a well-known spicy napa cabbage dish, is traditionally buried in the earth during its fermentation time (Oum, 2019). Fermented food culture is a unique element that distinguishes Korean food and adds to its appeal in the culinary tourism sector.

Health Perspectives

The literature on the health benefits and cultural significance of Korean food highlights the unique aspects of its culinary traditions. Kim et al. (2016) asserted that Korea's agricultural history has fostered a distinctive food culture characterized by a high vegetable intake and the use of fermentation techniques. This has spurred growing curiosity about Korean cuisine, particularly its health benefits. Research indicates that the health benefits of Korean food are largely attributable to its ingredients and cooking methods (Health Magazine, 2006). For instance, the fermentation process, which uses effective microorganisms to prevent spoilage, is a key component of many Korean dishes. Popular fermented foods, such as kimchi, doenjang (fermented soybean paste), and gochujang (fermented red chili paste), are not only integral to Korean cuisine but also offer numerous health benefits (Shin & Jeong, 2015).

Kimchi, for example, is known for its probiotic properties, which help reduce harmful gut bacteria, thereby promoting digestive health. Similarly, other fermented foods like jeotgal (salted fermented seafood) enhance flavor, appetite, and nutritional value (Kim et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Korean diet is rich in vegetables and seaweed, which provide essential vitamins and fiber. Vegetables such as lettuce, peppers, carrots, and cucumbers are often consumed raw with sauces like gochujang and doenjang, while seaweed dishes made from laver, kelp, and green algae are common (Kim et al., 2016). The inclusion of varied seasonings, or yangnyeom, created from ingredients like garlic, green onions, red pepper, and ginger, sets Korean food apart from other East Asian cuisines (Surh, 2003). Medicinal herbs and spices, such as black pepper, are also used to enhance the flavors and health benefits of Korean dishes, demonstrating the deep connection between food and health in Korean culinary practices (Hu, 1610). Additionally, the cultural significance of food in Korea is deeply rooted in family traditions, with home-cooked meals (jipbap) symbolizing a mother's love and dedication and emphasizing the importance of natural, unprocessed ingredients (Kim et al., 2016).

Halal Issues: The concept of halal, which denotes what is permissible or lawful in Islamic law, has become a prevalent term in the food industry, particularly in Muslim countries. The term not only applies to food and beverages but also extends to various aspects of Muslim daily life, emphasizing sanitation, protection, and nutritional value. Baharuddin et al. (2015) highlighted that halal and toyyiban (meaning clean and nutritious) symbolize sensitivity toward ensuring food safety and hygiene that is acceptable for Muslim consumption. The growing awareness of and demand for halal food aligns with broader consumer trends toward food safety, health, and ethical considerations.

Previous studies have indicated a significant overlap between the principles of halal food and the general consumer demand for sustainable and ethically produced food. For instance, the halal food market's expansion is partly driven by non-Muslim consumers who are attracted to the perceived higher standards of food safety and quality associated with halal certification (Alqudsi, 2014). This means that halal food products, by adhering to stringent health and ethical standards, can appeal to a broader market beyond the Muslim community. Furthermore, the integration of halal standards into mainstream food safety practices can enhance overall food quality. For example, Tieman and Ghazali (2014) argued that adopting halal certification in global supply chains not only ensures compliance with Islamic dietary laws but also promotes better food safety practices, benefiting all consumers. This demonstrates how halal accreditation can serve as a benchmark for high-quality, safe, and ethically produced food.

Easy to make and prepare: The convenience and simplicity of preparing Korean dishes are integral aspects of their popularity, particularly dishes like bibimbap, which primarily uses grains such as rice and barley. Shin and Jeong (2015) note that Korean cuisine frequently features various types of bap (cooked rice), including steamed rice, boiled barley, and multigrain rice, as the fundamental components of main dishes. Kimchi, a staple side dish in Korean cuisine, exemplifies the ease of preparation. It is typically accompanied by grilled meats, vegetables, and salads seasoned with garlic and chili powder. These side dishes, whether cooked fresh or

seasoned with vinegar, are straightforward to make, highlighting the practicality of Korean cooking (Shin & Jeong, 2015). Seasoning is another critical element that enhances the flavor of Korean food. Key seasonings include fermented soy sauce, fermented soybean paste, vinegar, gochujang (fermented red chili paste), and fermented fish sauces made from anchovies and shrimp. These seasonings not only add depth and complexity to dishes but also underscore traditional fermentation techniques that are central to Korean culinary practices (Shin & Jeong, 2015).

Research supports the idea that the simplicity and ease of preparation of Korean dishes contribute to their appeal. Korean food is not only tasty and varied, but it is also affordable and easy to find, therefore, it is a popular choice for food exploration. According to Ashraf (2024), many traditional Korean dishes are made with simple, easily accessible ingredients, which contributes to their affordability. This accessibility is further enhanced by the health benefits associated with the ingredients and preparation methods used in Korean dishes, making them attractive to health-conscious consumers (Kim et al., 2016). Moreover, the incorporation of fermented ingredients not only improves the taste and nutritional profile of dishes but also aligns with modern dietary preferences that favor natural and minimally processed foods. The fermentation process, which has been refined over centuries, plays a crucial role in preserving food and enhancing its flavors, contributing to the distinctive taste of Korean cuisine (Kim et al., 2016). By referring to the literature review, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H1: There is a relationship between the health perspectives and the acceptance of Korean food culture by young consumers.

Authentic Taste of Korean Food
Food represents a country's culture and is part of it. Accordingly, foods from other countries can appeal to foreigners as unique and sometimes exotic characteristics reflecting a country's culture (Jang et.al, 2012). This uniqueness and difference are often described as "authenticity." This authenticity factor has a significant impact on customers in other countries and is a crucial element of ethnic foods that sets them apart from local cuisines (Chandon et al., 2000; Peabody, 1985; Leclerc et al., 1994). Authenticity is a powerful concept frequently used by restaurateurs to market their cuisine; and deliver a genuine experience to consumers (Jang et al., 2011). The evaluation of authenticity in ethnic restaurants hinges on whether the food is prepared according to traditional methods by local people, ensuring that it is not modified to satisfy consumer expectations (Ebster & Guist, 2004). The definition of traditional Korean food by Chung (2015) and Chung (2009) reflects the idea that food is made with raw materials or ingredients that are traditionally used in Korea, or with similar ingredients. It also involves using authentic or similar cooking methods as well as having historical and cultural characteristics. Additionally, traditional Korean food has developed and is passed on throughout people's lives. Another significant factor is the visual appeal of Korean cuisine, characterized by vibrant colors and textures. Kwon et al. (2015) highlighted that the aesthetic presentation of Korean food, including the arrangement of various banchan (side dishes), plays a crucial role in the dining experience. Fermentation and preservation are central to Korean culinary practices. Kimchi, a staple of Korean cuisine, exemplifies these methods. Park et al. (2016) discussed how fermentation imparts unique flavors and health benefits, making it a cornerstone of Korean dietary habits. The fermentation of kimchi and other fermented foods like doenjang (soybean paste) and gochujang (chili paste), is essential for flavor development and nutritional enhancement.

Creating an authentic dining experience involves more than just tasting the food; it encompasses the entire restaurant atmosphere (Jang et al., 2011). For instance, employees at Korean ethnic restaurants may wear traditional Korean clothing (hanbok), and the decor may reflect Korean cultural elements, making customers feel as though they are in a mini Korea. This immersive environment, combined with the hiring of original Korean chefs to maintain authentic tastes, reinforces the restaurant's commitment to authenticity. Despite the staged elements, customers can still perceive these experiences as authentic, demonstrating that authenticity is subjective and can be shaped by ethnic images and atmospheres (Ebster & Guist, 2004). This indicates that authenticity in ethnic restaurants is not only about maintaining traditional culinary methods but also about creating a holistic experience that resonates with consumers' expectations of authenticity.

Ethnic Foods: In recent years, various ethnic cuisines have become increasingly popular in global food markets. Ethnic food evolves from human culture, and human biological phenomena have significant sociocultural characteristics and are integral to human values (Kwon, 2017). This surge is driven by the increasing availability of ethnic food restaurants and supplies, along with consumers' growing desire to diversify and balance their nutritional diets (Jones, 1997). Mun (2009) emphasized that Asia plays a crucial role in the global food market, particularly in promoting unique foods with functional benefits. Modern consumers are keen on exploring new food experiences and flavor combinations, spurred, by the global exchange of culinary traditions, which include the distinctive flavors imparted by specific spices (Danhi and Slatkin, 2009).

Dietary changes are essential for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and simplified diets often lead to more health issues (Frison et al., 2006). As cultures evolve and spread globally, consumers' food preferences expand, with various ethnic foods being incorporated into their regular diets (Tian, 2001). Different ethnic groups possess unique cultural backgrounds that influence their food and dietary habits. The recognition of flavor is closely linked to memory, and personal experiences with food are significant in consumer choices (Brandon et al., 2011). Varadachari (2002) noted that the inability to precisely define or measure taste contributes to the connection between memories and taste experiences. Gilmore and Pine's (2007) model asserts that ethnic cuisine must maintain its original taste to remain "true to itself." The global use of diverse sauces has significantly enhanced the flavor profiles of various dishes (Rengsutthi and Charoenrein, 2011), with sauces being a crucial factor in defining the unique taste of a dish. The waste of food products leads to an underappreciation of their unique qualities, which influence eating habits (Mojet and Koster, 2005).

Previous studies have revealed variations in consumers' ability to recall traditional cuisines. For instance, Yusop et al. (2009) found that Chinese consumers living in Europe struggled to identify Chinese dishes. This noted that "authenticity" may vary according to individual experiences and the primary foods used in testing. Jang et al. (2012) discovered that customers experience positive emotions when dining in Korean restaurants because of the authentic atmosphere, highlighting the importance of maintaining an ethnic restaurant's genuine environment. Tey et.al (2018) highlighted the current understanding of why consumers choose to eat ethnic food and stated that this understanding can be improved by identifying the values that influence food preferences. By referring to the literature review, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H2: There is a relationship between the authentic taste of Korean food and young consumer acceptance.

Acceptance of Malaysian Consumers toward Korean food
The growing popularity of Korean dramas (K-dramas) in Malaysia has significantly boosted the visibility and acceptance of Korean culture, particularly its cuisine. The interest in Korean culture has penetrated various aspects of Malaysian life, from entertainment to culinary preferences. This cultural influence is evident in the increasing demand for Korean food among Malaysians, particularly teenagers and young adults, who actively seek out and embrace these culinary experiences. The popularity of Hallyu culture offers an opportunity to expose Korean food goods to consumers in Muslim-majority nations who are already familiar with and interested in Korean culture (Basri et.al, 2024)). This phenomenon can be observed in the widespread popularity of Korean restaurants and food products in Malaysia, which cater to the growing demand for authentic Korean dining experiences.

Previous studies have highlighted the Malaysian market's acceptance of Korean food is driven by its portrayal in popular media, which has successfully captured the imagination and taste buds of the younger demographic (Tan, 2023). The visual and narrative appeal of K-dramas often includes detailed depictions of Korean food, enticing viewers to explore these dishes in their real lives. This media influence is corroborated by empirical research indicating that exposure to foreign cultures through media significantly impacts food choices and dining preferences (Mun, 2009). Furthermore, the trend of Malaysian teenagers actively seeking Korean food aligns with broader global trends of increasing interest in ethnic foods. Jones (1997) notes that ethnic food consumption is rising rapidly worldwide, driven by consumers' desires for novel and diverse culinary experiences. In the Malaysian context, this trend is particularly pronounced among youth, who view Korean food as both a trendy and culturally enriching option.

Culture: According to Gupta (2003), culture can be understood as a way of life, that encompasses cultivated theories, learned behaviors, shared mental programs, convincing philosophies, and interconnected symbols that provide a framework for members of society. This definition underscores the role of culture in shaping social norms and behaviors. Food is deeply intertwined with cultural identity and social structures. Hall and Mitchell (2000) argue that food serves multiple purposes beyond mere sustenance, linking it to issues of identity, culture, production, consumption, and sustainability. This perspective highlights the potential of destination foods to connect various senses and cultural understandings, positioning food as a significant element in tourism and cultural exchange. Seo and Yun (2015) added that individual food consumption reflects personal identity and agree that what we eat conveys meaning about who we are.

The promotion of unique and traditional cuisines can significantly enhance a country's culinary image and attract tourists. Long (2004) asserted that countries with distinctive cuisines can leverage food as a key element of tourism, particularly in the realm of culinary tourism. This idea is supported by Bessière (1998), who notes that traditional food not only provides pleasure but also serves as a cultural activity that can draw tourists to specific locations. This underscores the role of local food in enriching travel experiences and fostering cultural education. Strategic promotion of local foods has become a central component of tourism development. Local dishes can enhance a destination's appeal by offering tourists the opportunity to taste unique and authentic flavors. This approach is evident in various government initiatives that promote the uniqueness of national cuisines. For example, Huang (2009) discusses how Korean tourism effectively utilizes TV dramas and entertainment to popularize Korean cuisine, illustrating the powerful influence of media on food trends. The rise of the Korean Wave (K-Wave) exemplifies how cultural products, such as TV dramas, can boost the popularity of a nation's cuisine and contribute to its cultural and economic growth. Huang (2009) further concludes that the intersection of culture and economy is vital for social structure, with Korean TV dramas serving as a successful example of cultural and economic imperialism.

Research Framework

Figure 1: presents the proposed research framework of this study.

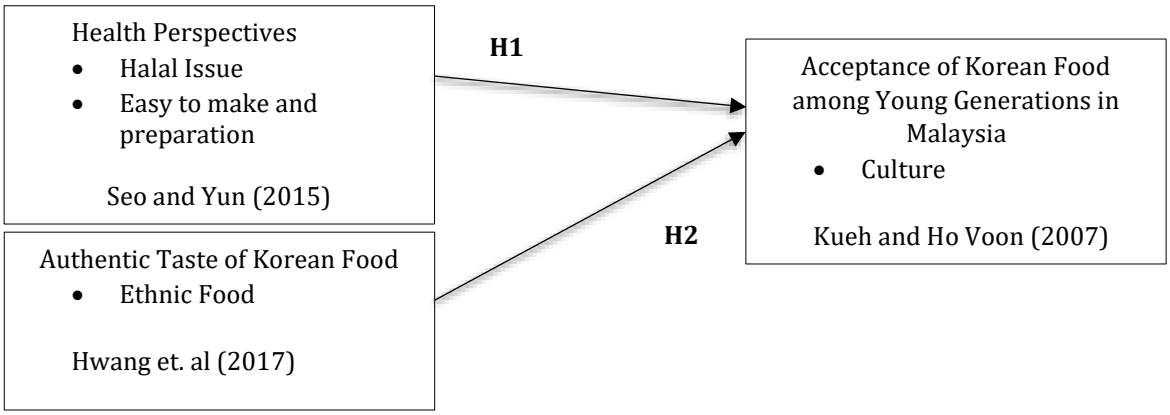


Figure 1: Propose research framework adopted from Hwang et.al (2017), Seo and Yun (2015), and Kueh and Ho Voon (2007).

3. Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) stated that quantitative research explores more valuable outcomes through proper evaluation in the form of figures. Therefore, this study used a quantitative research design focusing on producing numerical evidence to analyze cause-and-effect relationships within the research context. Specifically, it is a descriptive study that aims to look at the relationship between the independent variables (health perspectives, authentic taste of Korean Food) and the dependent variable (acceptance of Korean food culture among young generations). The population of this study is Generation Y (age 22-39) and Generation Z (age 6-23) who reside in Sungai Petani, Kedah, and Pulau Pinang. A convenience sampling method was used

and randomly selected 150 respondents participated in the survey using G-Power software. All 150 questionnaires were prepared and distributed via Gmail, WhatsApp, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms.

Instrumentation

The research instrument was created to meet the research objectives, research questions and research framework. The questionnaire consists of four main sections which are as follows; Part A (Hwang et.al (2017) focused on the respondent's frequency of eating Korean food, how they learned about Korean food, and how often they ate it. Part B evaluated respondents' opinions on Korean food health perspectives, such as halal certification and ease of preparation (Seo and Yun (2015). Part C assessed the respondents' perceptions of the authentic taste of Korean food from Hwang et.al (2017). Part D (Kueh and Ho Voon (2007) measured the respondents' acceptance of Korean food in terms of culture. Part E focuses on respondents' demographic profiles. The questions were designed to be simple and easy for the respondents to understand. The respondents were required to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) with "strongly disagree" to (5) with "strongly agree".

4. Results and Discussion

The statistical tests used to analyze data such as descriptive, frequency, and the Pearson Correlation analysis were used to examine the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The questionnaire item was divided into the frequency of eating Korean Food, Korean food health perspectives, authentic taste of Korean Food, consumer acceptance of Korean food, and demographic profile.

Reliability Test

To test the validity of the instrument, the study conducted a reliability test on the research instrument using Cronbach's Alpha. These results demonstrate that the research instrument had strong internal consistency and reliability across all sections. The high Cronbach's Alpha values for the items in each section are positively correlated and provide consistent measurement. The results are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Cronbach's alpha values

Instruments	Alpha Cronbach's Value	Number of Items
Korean Food Health Perspectives	0.966	12
The authentic taste of Korean food	0.975	4
Consumer acceptance	0.984	7

Profile of Respondents

Table 2 displays the demographic profile of the respondents who participated in the study. The age distribution of the 150 respondents was as follows; 37 (24.7%) were 18-20 years old, 86 (57.3%) were 21-23 years old, 17 (11.3%) were 24-26 years old, 2 (1.3%) were 27-29 years old, and 8 (5.3%) were 30-36 years old. The gender distribution was 46 (30.7%) male and 104 (69.3%) female respondents. In terms of education level, 91 (60.7%) students had a bachelor's degree, 44 (29.3%) had a diploma, 12 (8%) had SPM, and 3 (2%) had post-graduate studies. For salary, 90 (60%) were students, 15 (10%) earned 1000-1500, 15 (10%) earned 2500-5000, 11 (7.3%) earned 0-500, 10 (6.7%) earned 1500-2500, and 9 (6%) earned 500-1000.

Table 2: Frequency and percentages of demographic profiles.

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	46	30.7
	Female	104	69.3
Age	18 – 20 years	37	24.7
	21 – 23 years	86	57.3
	24 – 26 years	17	11.3
	27 – 29 years	2	1.3

	30-year-old and above	8	5.3
Education Level	SPM	12	8.0
	Diploma	44	29.3
	Degree	91	60.7
	Others (Master, PhD, etc)	3	2.0
Salary	Students	90	60.0
	RM 0 - RM500	11	7.3
	RM 500 – RM 1000	9	6.0
	RM 1000 – RM 1500	15	10.0
	RM 1500 – RM2500	10	6.7
	RM2500 – RM5000	15	10.0

The results of screening questions about the frequency of eating Korean food displayed in Table 3 show that out of 150 respondents, 143 (95.3%) had tried Korean food, while 7 (4.7%) had not. The second analysis focused on the sources through which respondents learned about Korean food with 22 respondents (14.7%) hearing about it from the internet, 91 (60.7%) from social media, 30 (20%) from friends, and 7 (4.7%) from family. For the frequency with which respondents eat Korean food, the analysis revealed that 2 respondents (1.3%) ate Korean food every day, 6 (4%) once a week, 65 (43.3%) once a month, and 77 (51.3%) ate it once a year. The final analysis assessed respondents' opinions on the affordability of Korean food, with 79 respondents (52.7%) believing Korean food is affordable, and 71 (47.3%) not.

Table 3: Frequency and percentage of respondents eating Korean Food

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Have you tried Korean food?	Yes	143	95.3
	No	7	4.7
Where have you heard about Korean food?	Internet	22	14.7
	Social media	91	60.7
	Friends	30	20.0
	Family	7	4.7
How often do you eat Korean food?	Every day	2	1.3
	Once a week	6	4.0
	Once a month	65	43.3
	Once a year	77	51.3
In your opinion, Korean food is affordable to purchase?	Yes	79	52.7
	No	71	47.3

Descriptive Analysis of Korean Food Health Perspectives

Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations of various factors related to Korean food health perspectives. The results indicate a range of perceptions regarding the health and appeal of Korean food. The highest-rated factor was "Korean food is attractive to eat" with a mean score of 3.89 (SD = 0.923), indicating strong agreement among respondents on the visual appeal of Korean cuisine. Respondents also highly rated the perception that Korean food is hygienic, with a mean score of 3.75 (SD = 1.011). The taste of Korean food acceptable to young consumers received a mean score of 3.69 (SD = 0.904), showing a generally positive attitude toward Korean cuisine flavors The ease of finding ingredients for cooking Korean food at home had a mean score of 3.62 (SD = 0.946), implying that respondents found it relatively convenient to access these

ingredients. The aspect of using organic and fresh ingredients in Korean cuisine was rated as 3.57 (SD = 0.839), indicating a favorable view toward healthier food choices. The use of halal and trustworthy ingredients in Korean restaurants received a moderate mean score of 3.55 (SD = 0.816), agreeing with a positive perception among consumers. On the other hand, the lowest-rated factor was "Have you ever cooked Korean food?" with a mean score of 2.59 (SD = 1.238), suggesting that fewer respondents have personal experience preparing Korean food.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Korean Food Health Perspectives

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Have you ever cooked Korean food?	2.59	1.238
The food served at the restaurant is hygienic	3.75	1.011
Korean restaurants use halal and trustworthy ingredients	3.55	0.816
Korean food is attractive to eat	3.89	0.923
The restaurant uses organic and fresh ingredients	3.57	0.839
The food served is easy and not complicated to eat	3.62	0.946
The taste of food is acceptable for Malaysians	3.69	0.904
If we want to cook at home, the ingredients are easy to find	3.12	1.032
The method of cooking Korean food is simple and not complicated	3.33	0.847
The food tastes delicious even when cooked at home	3.45	1.014
The food is rich in nutrition and delicious	3.68	0.900
The food is easy to prepare and make	3.41	0.920

Descriptive Analysis of Authentic Taste of Korean Food

Table 5 presents the mean and standard deviation for various factors related to the authentic taste of Korean food. The highest-rated factor is "Can accept the taste of Korean food" with a mean score of 3.72 (SD = 0.956), indicating a strong overall acceptance of Korean food's taste and its acceptableness to respondents. The perception of a unique and exotic relish owing to the differences in food from other countries received a mean score of 3.66 (SD = 0.858), suggesting a positive view toward the distinctiveness of Korean flavors. The feeling of dining at a high-class restaurant with effort rather than just consuming instant food received a mean score of 3.57 (SD = 0.937), indicating a moderate agreement among respondents regarding the dining experience associated with Korean food. The lowest-rated factor is "Can you eat other side dishes with rice, for example, kimchi?" with a mean score of 3.53 (SD = 1.145), suggesting reservations about specific Korean side dishes.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of the Authentic Taste of Korean Food

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Can accept the taste of Korean food	3.72	0.956
Can feel unique and exotic relish due to having food that is different from that of other countries	3.66	0.858
Can you eat other side dishes with rice, for example, kimchi?	3.53	1.145
Can get the feeling of going to a high-class restaurant with effort, unlike just eating fast food	3.57	0.937

Descriptive Analysis of the Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food

Table 6 displays the mean and standard deviation for various factors related to consumer acceptance of Korean food. The highest-rated factor is "Can differentiate between Korean and other cuisines" with a mean score of 3.79 (SD = 0.869), indicating that consumers could clearly distinguish Korean food from other types of food. "The service offered at the restaurant was satisfactory" received a mean score of 3.67 (SD = 0.871), suggesting a generally positive perception among respondents regarding the service quality at Korean restaurants. "Can identify the Korean restaurant properly without confusing them with Chinese or Malay restaurant" had a mean

score of 3.64 (SD = 0.929), indicating a relatively high level of agreement among respondents in correctly identifying Korean restaurants. "Quickness of order and service in Korean restaurant" had a mean score of 3.59 (SD = 0.876), indicating a moderate level of agreement among respondents regarding the efficiency of service at Korean restaurants. "Customers get the feeling at Korea when entering a restaurant" had a mean score of 3.50 (SD = 0.947), indicating a moderate level of agreement among respondents that they experience a sense of being in Korea when entering a Korean restaurant". The price of the food and service provided is affordable" received a mean score of 3.34 (SD = 0.989), suggesting a moderate level of agreement among respondents regarding the affordability of Korean food and services. On the other hand, "The staff use Korean language at the restaurants in addition to English and Malay language" received a mean score of 2.97 (SD = 1.058), suggesting a lower level of agreement among respondents regarding the use of Korean language by Korean restaurant staff.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customers get the feeling of being in Korea when entering a restaurant	3.50	0.947
Staff use the Korean language at the restaurant in addition to English and Malay	2.97	1.058
Can identify Korean restaurants properly without confusing them with Chinese or Malay restaurants	3.64	0.929
The price of the food and services provided is affordable	3.34	0.989
Can differentiate between Korean and other cuisines	3.79	0.869
The service offered at the restaurant was satisfactory	3.67	0.871
Quickness of order and service in a Korean restaurant	3.59	0.876

Correlation Analysis of Variables

The Pearson correlation coefficient analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between Korean food health perspectives (independent variable) and consumer acceptance of Korean food (dependent variable). The Pearson Correlation analysis in Table 7 shows a significant positive relationship between Korean food health perspectives and consumer acceptance of Korean food, with a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.991 and a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$). This means that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H0) and acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H1). Thus, H1 is accepted. Therefore, the relationship between Korean food health perspectives and consumer acceptance is effective, indicating that improvements in the health aspects of Korean food are likely to lead to increased consumer acceptance. The high correlation coefficient (0.991) demonstrates that as consumers perceive Korean food to be healthier, their acceptance and preference for it correspondingly increase. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of health perceptions in consumer food choices (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006).

Table 7: Pearson Coefficient Correlation between Korean Food Health Perspectives and Consumer Acceptance

Variable	Korean Food Health Perspectives	Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food
Korean Food Health Perspectives	1	.991**
Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food	.991**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	**-**	**.000**
N	**150**	**150**
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)		

The Pearson correlation coefficient analysis in Table 8 displays the relationship between the authentic tastes of Korean food (independent variable) and consumer acceptance of Korean food (dependent variable). The analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between authentic Korean food taste and consumer

acceptance of Korean food. The correlation coefficient (r) was 0.987, with a p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a statistically significant relationship between these variables. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H1) is accepted. Thus, H2 is accepted. Therefore, the relationship between the authentic tastes of Korean food and consumer acceptance is effective. This highlights that as consumers perceive Korean food to be more authentic in taste, their acceptance and preference for it increase significantly.

Table 8: Pearson Coefficient Correlation between Authentic Taste of Korean Food and Consumer Acceptance

Variable	Authentic Taste of Korean Food	Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food
Authentic Taste of Korean Food	1	.987**
Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food	.987**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	**-**	**.000**
N	**150**	**150**
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)		

Influences of Korean Health Perspectives on Consumer Acceptance

Health perspectives related to Korean food can influence consumer acceptance of Korean food. According to the respondents, we can see that not everyone has tried Korean food, possibly because of its high cost. Respondents agreed that Korean food is appealing because it is commonly served with meat wrapped in a special sauce and fresh lettuce. This is supported by the descriptive analysis of health perspectives related to Korean food, which reveals that the item "Korean food is attractive to eat" has the highest score, with an average of 3.89. Additionally, we should consider that health also involves hygiene. Korean people are known for their cleanliness standards, as they always wear gloves when eating and their eating places are clean and tidy. Korean food is also popular because it includes various vegetables that help reduce cholesterol and promote positive biological activity. Dietitians state that many common ingredients used in Korean cuisine are vegetables, and cooking methods such as grilling, stewing, and fermenting are healthier than deep frying. Furthermore, the ingredients in Korean food can improve digestion, strengthen bones, and promote skin health. When dining at a Korean restaurant, it is common to be served soup with every meal, which is a satisfying and relatively low-calorie option. Undoubtedly, when food is served freshly, customers are more likely to seek it out due to its benefits for their well-being (Rozekhi, Hussin, Siddiq, Rashid and Salmi, 2016). As Rozekhi et al. mentioned, restaurants must make customers aware of and guarantee the use of fresh products and ingredients. This is essential for establishing long-term and profitable relationships with customers.

Influence of Authentic Taste on Consumer Acceptance of Korean Food

The results show a Pearson correlation, with an R-value of 0.987. This shows a positive relationship between the authentic tastes of Korean food and consumer acceptance of Korean food. The data confirms that the authentic taste of Korean food can influence consumer acceptance. The Pearson correlation value (0.987) indicates a strong correlation between authentic taste and consumer acceptance. Regarding the research question of whether authentic taste can impact consumer acceptance, most respondents in Sungai Petani, Kedah, and Pulau Pinang agreed that taste significantly influences their choice to eat Korean food. The global popularity of Korean cuisine is demonstrated by the acceptance of authentic Korean flavors, such as kimchi. Kimchi, a staple in Korean food, is particularly noted for its unique flavors and health benefits, leading people worldwide to seek out and learn how to prepare it themselves and promote healthy meals in traditional ways (Hongu et al., 2017). This is supported by the result of the descriptive analysis, which shows that the lowest score for "Can eat other side dishes with rice, for example, kimchi" is 3.53, indicating agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 2-Disagree to 4-Agree.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

This study contributes to understanding customer preferences and the acceptance of Korean food among residents in Penang and Sungai Petani, Malaysia, and it fills a gap in the literature on cultural influences in local contexts. The localized focus enhances the result accuracy and offers insights into psychological perspectives on consumer behavior. Practically, the study aids consumers in making informed choices, encourages repeat patronage, and helps restaurant owners improve customer experiences, thus driving business growth. The findings can inform policymakers on strategies to promote cultural exchange and tourism by leveraging the global popularity of Korean culture to strengthen bilateral relations and economic opportunities between Malaysia and South Korea.

However, this study has some limitations that need to be addressed. The study was geographically conducted in Sungai Petani, Kedah, and Pulau Pinang, thereby limiting the sample size of respondents. Additionally, compared to larger cities such as Kuala Lumpur, the number of Korean restaurants is relatively small, and few have halal certification. This limitation of both location and sample size may have affected the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into Malaysian consumers' acceptance of Korean food. Therefore, future research should underscore this challenge by expanding the geographical scope to encompass various regions in Malaysia, such as Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, and other cities with larger populations. Including more diverse areas will help obtain a more representative sample, which can improve the generalizability of the findings (Rozekhi et al., 2016). Moreover, increasing the sample size will enhance the reliability and validity of the results. Larger sample sizes help mitigate the effects of hidden values and provide a more accurate picture of population preferences. This will employ more robust statistical analyses, such as multivariate regression, to identify key predictors of consumer acceptance. Additionally, further studies should investigate the importance of the authenticity of Korean food which is valuable for restaurants. Understanding how different authenticity aspects, such as ingredients, cooking methods, and dining experiences, influence consumer satisfaction can guide business practices.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing Malaysian young consumers' acceptance of Korean food, focusing on residents of Penang and Sungai Petani, Kedah. The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between the authentic taste of Korean food and consumer acceptance ($r = 0.987$, $p < 0.01$), highlighting the significant role of unique flavors in shaping consumer preferences. Furthermore, the health benefits associated with Korean food, including its vegetable-rich ingredients and hygienic dining practices, were critical in influencing consumer attitudes. This study concludes that many Malaysian consumers have already tasted Korean food, with some expressing a preference for it to the extent of regular consumption. This demonstrates the increasing presence of Korean restaurants in Malaysia, such as Seoul Garden, Mr Dakgalbi, K-Fry, Kyochon 1991, and 4Fingers, which reflects this growing interest. This information is valuable for restaurant owners and policymakers. It can help create a diverse culinary landscape that meets different consumers' needs.

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