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Determinants of Food Selections among International Travelers Towards Malaysian Cuisine

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Abstract: Food plays a crucial role in the travel experience, serving as an important aspect of destination marketing to attract international travelers to Malaysia. Therefore, this study discovers the determinants of Malaysian food selections among travelers. A quantitative research approach was used in this study due to its effectiveness in data collection. A descriptive study was used to determine the motivational and psychological factors affecting the selection of Malaysian cuisine by international travelers. A non-probability, convenience sampling method was developed, consenting to the selection of any international travelers meeting the criteria. The target population for this study consisted of international travelers located in Kuala Lumpur. The selection of the population was travelers staying in Malaysia for a duration of three days to two weeks and who had tried Malaysian cuisine during their visit. Data was gathered through self-administered surveys of 398 travelers visiting Malaysia. The findings reveal a positive relationship between these motivational factors and travelers' intention to consume local food. The study suggests that experiencing local cuisine helps create positive, lasting memories, intensifying tourists' relationships with local attractions and enhancing their behavioral intentions.

Keywords: *Malaysian Cuisine, Motivational Factors, Psychological Factors, Travelers*

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the biggest industries worldwide, adding significantly to the economic development of many nations (UNWTO, 2023). Malaysia, known for its vibrant cultural diversity, is an increasingly popular tourist destination, particularly due to its rich culinary heritage (Othman et al., 2020). The realm's food is an incomparable combination of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and homegrown influences, making it a key fascination for international travelers seeking genuine gastronomic experiences (Chandran et al., 2021). Food plays an integral role in inspiring a traveler's overall experience, serving as both a reflection of local culture and a significant motivator in travel decisions (Chang et al., 2022). According to Heung and Gu (2023), Malaysia's cuisine has acquired global recognition, but determinants that stimulate international travelers' food selection remain underexplored. Several variables, including cultural background, perceived authenticity, social media influences, and even food safety observations, might shape how international tourists/travelers secure and select Malaysian cuisine.

Considering these determinants is crucial for Malaysia as the country seeks to position itself as a global food tourism hub and enhance its competitive improvement in the tourism industry. Therefore, the emergent prominence of food tourism has prompted scholars to investigate the elements that affect travelers' food selection, with some studies highlighting the role of food-related emotions and sensory experiences in destination decision-making (Kim et al., 2021). Thus, this research aims to examine the key determinants influencing international travelers' selection of Malaysian cuisine, considering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

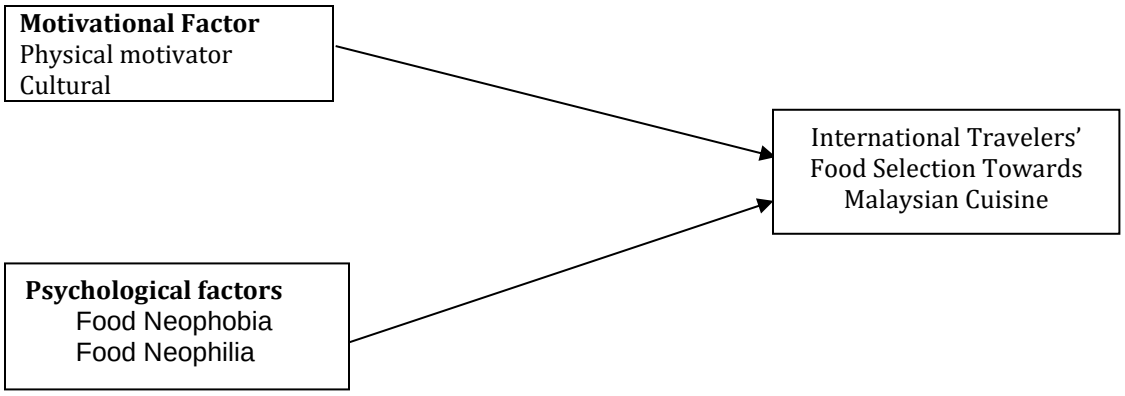
As food tourism grows in importance, understanding the determinants influencing international travelers' food selection becomes essential for a destination, namely Malaysia, which seeks to enhance its competitive edge in the global tourism market. Several determinants influence food preferences among international travelers, including cultural familiarity, food authenticity, taste preferences, food safety, and social media exposure (Heung & Gu, 2023). Malaysian cuisine has become one of the central attractions in Malaysia, with dishes such as *nasi lemak*, *char kway teow*, *satay*, and *laksa* being recognized internationally (Tan et al., 2022). For many travelers, the yearning to experience authentic food is often a motivating force behind their travel rulings,

making food a key element in shaping their overall perception of a destination (Hjalager, 2022). Tourists' decisions regarding which local foods to try are not only guided by individual tastes but also by perceptions of the food's authenticity and the availability of food-related information before and during the trip (Kim et al., 2021). Social media platforms, food bloggers, and online reviews increasingly shape tourist expectations and experiences (Smith & Chang, 2022). Furthermore, factors such as food safety, hygiene standards, and even environmental sustainability are progressively persuading travelers' choices in destination food consumption (Chang et al., 2022).

The primary aim of this research is to examine the key determinants influencing international travelers' food preferences for Malaysian local food. By understanding these factors, the study will explore how travelers' motivation to try new or unfamiliar foods, essentially their degree of food neophobia or food neophilia, shapes their decisions when selecting Malaysian cuisine. The following are the research study's objectives:

RO1: To identify the key determinants that influence international travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine
RO2: To examine the key determinant~~s~~ of the factor that influenced international travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine

The frameworks shown below are adopted from Athena et al. (2012) and consist of two motivational factors for tourist consumption from Crompton and McKay (1997) and Kim et al. (2009). Two psychological factors for travelers' selection from Crompton and McKay (1997) and Kim et al. (2009). Understanding psychological factors based on these categorizations can assist destination marketing organizations and the broader tourism industry in enhancing their understanding of international tourists' preferred experiences while traveling.



The craving to taste local or regional dishes, especially street food, can stem from an intrinsic need for excitement and sensory stimulation, allowing travelers to engage with a destination in a more immersive and adventurous way (Sthapit et al., 2022). According to Kim et al. (2021), tourists when traveling are often more open to taking greater risks and trying something new than they would do in their everyday lives. The novelty of a journey can encourage neophilia tendencies, encouraging tourists to explore unfamiliar and exotic foods that they might avoid in their home countries. As street food becomes a progressively integral part of the global food tourism scene, its popularity continues to grow, particularly among travelers seeking authentic and unique culinary experiences (Sánchez-Carrillo et al., 2023). Nevertheless, to certify the sustainability of the street food industry, it is important to address the potential health possibilities associated with it. These incorporate stronger hygiene practices and food safety principles to reduce risks and protect both customers and vendors (Heung & Gu, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Motivational Factors

Two key motivational factors, which are physical and cultural, must be considered to identify the influences on international tourists' food preferences for Malaysian local cuisine. From the tourism perspective, motivation

refers to the internal psychological drivers that prompt individuals to act in particular ways or spark their interest in travel and engaging in tourist activities.

In the context of food tourism, physical motivators often relate to the sensory appeal of food, such as aroma, taste, visual presentation, and texture (Imtiyaz, Soni, & Yukongdi, 2021). As the sensory experience of eating is a significant aspect of the overall tourism experience, these elements can stimulate tourists' desire to try local dishes. The physical motivator signifies the tangible, sensory aspects of a tourist's familiarity that drive their curiosity and fondness towards certain activities, including food consumption (Sthapit, Piramanayayagam & Björk, 2020).

For global tourists, physical factors associated with food can involve the desirability of unusual flavors or distinctive ingredients that they may not find in their home nations. The physical act of overriding local cuisine turns out to be a form of physical exploration, where tourists pursue novel and satisfying occurrences that satisfy their craving and curiosity. According to Gursoy, Chi, and Dyer (2009), this type of motivation is often driven by the need for physical satisfaction and the satisfaction of unique or unfamiliar culinary experiences.

Cultural influence is widely recognized as a significant factor in shaping food preferences and consumption patterns across different societies (Logue, 1991). Culture is deeply embedded in the values, traditions, and practices of a community, affecting not only the types of food consumed but also the methods of preparation, presentation, and consumption. As Finkelstein (1998) highlights, culture serves as a guiding framework that shapes what is considered edible or inedible, as well as how food is perceived in terms of social significance and dietary habits. This influence extends to how individuals evaluate the acceptability and quality of food based on sensory attributes such as taste, texture, aroma, and appearance (Prescott et al., 2002). Cultural norms often dictate which sensory properties are desirable, creating preferences that vary widely between regions and communities. For instance, while spicy foods may be integral to one culture, they may be less favored or even avoided in another.

Moreover, culture functions as a system of classification, determining how foods are grouped into categories such as "acceptable," "exotic," "edible," or "palatable" (Long, 2004; Makela, 2000). These classifications are influenced by historical, religious, and social contexts. For example, a food considered a delicacy in one culture might be seen as exotic or unpalatable in another. Religious dietary laws and traditional customs also play a significant role in defining these categories, further emphasizing the strong interconnection between culture and food choices. In essence, cultural influence goes beyond shaping mere preferences; it establishes a framework for understanding food within a broader social, historical, and emotional context. This cultural framework ultimately governs not only the physical act of eating but also the meanings and values associated with food in daily life.

Psychological factors

These psychological concepts can expressively affect travelers' motivation to try new and unfamiliar foods, such as traditional Malaysian dishes, which are often portrayed by unique flavors and ingredients. The partiality of international travelers to Malaysian local food is influenced by a variety of factors, including psychological factors such as food neophobia and food neophilia.

Travelers who display food neophobia may show reluctance towards trying street food or unfamiliar local dishes, fearing they may be too exotic, spicy, or unsafe. Referring to Heung & Gu (2023), this fear can be compounded by concerns about food safety, hygiene, and unfamiliar ingredients. Food neophobia tends to be manipulated by a variety of factors, including previous experiences with food, cultural background, and individual psychological traits (Raudenbush, 2021). For example, travelers from cultures with restrictive diets or more Westernized food systems might be more hesitant to try authentic Malaysian dishes, particularly those served in street food markets, which may be perceived as less hygienic or too different from their normal food preferences (Tan et al., 2022; Raudenbush, 2021).

Food neophilia is often drawn to the idea of trying unfamiliar foods as part of their travel adventure, and this psychological trait can significantly shape their food choices while traveling (Sthapit et al., 2022). Food neophilia, described by an excitement to try new and novel foods, plays a meaningful role in food tourism and

stimulates how international travelers engage with local cuisines, particularly in destinations like Malaysia, where food culture is rich and varied. For food neophiles, trying authentic, unique, or exotic dishes is an exciting part of the destination's allure, and they are more likely to explore street food, local specialties, and regional beverages that offer a taste of the culture.

3. Methodology

A quantitative research approach was applied due to its effectiveness in data collection. A descriptive study was used to determine the motivational and psychological factors affecting the selection of Malaysian cuisine by international travelers. A non-probability, convenience sampling method was developed, consenting to the selection of any international travelers meeting the criteria. The target population for this study consisted of international travelers located in Kuala Lumpur. The selection of the population was travelers staying in Malaysia for a duration of three days to two weeks and who had tried Malaysian cuisine during their visit. The instruments are built based on the independent variables. The instrument was designed based on a thorough review of the literature from prior studies. Section A focused on the respondents' demographic details, including gender, age, education level, nationality, occupation, and marital status. Section B addressed motivational factors, encompassing physical and cultural factors on international travelers' food selection for Malaysian cuisine. Finally, Section C examined psychological factors using a questionnaire grounded in previous research to assess the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS). To ensure data reliability and consistency, a pilot test (n=50) was conducted before the main study. A reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was performed to assess the internal consistency of the attributes measured. The analysis outcomes of this study presented the Cronbach value in each variable shown in Table 1. Generally, all the variables have an α value of higher than 0.7.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

	Cronbach's Alpha	N
Physical Motivator	0.892	5
Cultural	0.950	5
Psychological Factors	0.746	5

Traveler arrivals in Malaysia accounted for more than 24.7 million. Conferring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table, a required sample size of 381 was calculated to achieve a 95% assurance level. This was supported by Sekaran and Bougie (2010), who affirmed that convenience sampling was appropriate for this study. 450 questionnaires were distributed around Bukit Bintang and Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC), which are known as frequently visited spots by international travelers. Out of the distributed surveys, 52 were rejected, leaving 398 valid and usable responses. Data analysis was performed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were employed to identify the key determinants that influenced international travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine.

4. Findings and Discussion

The research objectives were answered based on descriptive analysis by observing the mean scores rated by the respondents. Two (2) parts are comprised of motivational factors towards travelers' food selection: physical and cultural. All questionnaires were designed with a 7-point rating scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), so there is no biased selection.

Descriptive Analysis

Objective 1: To determine the motivational factors affecting international travelers' food selection.

The Effect of Physical Factors

This sub-unit analyzes the mean score given by the respondents on the effect of physical motivators on travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine. The respondents' scores are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: The Mean Score of Respondents on the Effect of Physical Factors

Questions	N	Mean	Standard. Deviation
Tasting local food is exciting to me	398	5.43	1.56
Tasting local food makes me feel excited	398	6.00	1.24
Tasting local food takes me away from the masses and noise	398	6.11	.876
It is important to me that the local food I eat smells nice	398	6.33	.666
It is important to me that the local food I eat tastes good	398	6.34	1.57

The findings from the mean score analysis in Table 2 highlight interesting dynamics in how travelers perceive local food. The high mean score for the statement that local food "tastes good" (M = 6.34, SD = 1.57) underscores the central role that taste plays in shaping tourists' preferences and satisfaction with local cuisine. This result suggests that the sensory pleasure derived from taste is a significant factor in their overall dining experience. However, the relatively lower mean score for the statement that tasting local food is "an exciting experience" (M = 5.43, SD = 1.56) reveals a gap in how engaging the experience is perceived. This discrepancy indicates that while the taste of local food is highly appreciated, other experiential dimensions may not be as strongly felt by the respondents.

Studies by Chen et al. (2021) and Kuo et al. (2023) emphasize that tasting local food is inherently a multisensory experience. Beyond taste, factors like presentation (sight) and aroma (smell) significantly influence the perception of food. These findings suggest that for local food to deliver a truly exciting experience, efforts should focus on enhancing these multi-sensory aspects. For example, creative presentation, immersive storytelling about the food's cultural significance, and aromatic complexity could enhance excitement and deepen overall sensory engagement. Additionally, the gap between the taste and excitement ratings could imply a need to link food consumption more directly to cultural and emotional experiences. This could involve interactive food events, guided tastings, or culinary storytelling that connects tourists with the local culture, making the experience flavorful, emotionally enriching, and memorable.

The Effect of Cultural Factors

This sub-unit analyzes the mean score given by the respondents on the effect of cultural motivators on travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine. The respondents' scores are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The Mean Score of Respondents on the Effect of Cultural Factors

Questions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experiencing Malaysian cuisine enables me to learn what Malaysian cuisine tastes like	398	5.44	1.57
Experiencing Malaysian cuisine allows me to discover something new	398	6.00	1.24
Experiencing Malaysian cuisine makes me see things that I do not normally see	398	6.11	.876
Experiencing Malaysian cuisine helped me see other people live	398	5.44	1.57
Experiencing Malaysian cuisine allows me to increase my knowledge about a different culture	398	6.36	1.56

The highest mean score for the opportunity to explore Malaysian cuisine (M = 6.36, SD = 1.56) highlights that travelers are enthusiastic about discovering new foods as a way to broaden their understanding of diverse cultures. This suggests that food acts as a gateway for cross-cultural appreciation, offering a tangible and enjoyable way for travelers to connect with the heritage and traditions of Malaysia. However, the slightly lower mean score for the statement about fully appreciating Malaysian cuisine's unique flavors or gaining deeper insights into the lifestyles of others (M = 5.44, SD = 1.57) points to an area of ambiguity or underperformance in the culinary experience. This could imply that while travelers value the exposure to new foods, the experiential and cultural dimensions might not be fully realized. This gap could result from a lack of contextual storytelling, limited interaction with local communities, or insufficient emphasis on the cultural narratives behind the cuisine.

Sanip et al. (2022) underscore the richness of Malaysia's multicultural society, shaped by the Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various Indigenous groups, which has culminated in a vibrant and diverse culinary landscape. This diversity presents immense potential for local cuisine to serve as more than just a sensory experience—it can act as a medium for cultural education and connection. By incorporating elements such as guided food tours, cultural explanations behind dishes, or interactive cooking sessions, tourists could better appreciate the flavors and lifestyles tied to the food. Furthermore, enhancing the culinary experience to reflect Malaysia's multicultural tradition can deepen tourists' engagement. For example, showcasing how different ethnic groups have influenced iconic Malaysian dishes could help tourists see the interconnectedness of the culture and cuisine. Similarly, encouraging interactions between tourists and locals, such as through home-cooked meal experiences or street food tours, could provide insight into daily lifestyles and elevate the appreciation of unique flavors.

The Effect of Psychological Factors

This sub-unit analyzes the mean score given by the respondents on the psychological factor of travelers' food selection towards Malaysian cuisine. The respondents' scores are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: The Mean Score of Respondents on the Effect of Psychological Factors

Questions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am constantly sampling new and different food	398	5.44	1.57
If I do not know what is in a food, I will not try it	398	6.00	1.24
I am afraid to eat things I have never had before	398	6.11	.876
I like food from different countries	398	5.44	1.57
I am very particular about the foods I will eat	398	6.10	.892

The results from the mean score analysis reveal several key insights regarding respondents' psychological factors of food selection towards Malaysian cuisine. The main mean score was perceived for the statement that respondents are afraid to eat foods they have never tried before (M = 6.11, SD = 0.876), tracked closely by the statement that respondents are very particular about the foods they eat (M = 6.10, SD = 1.57). These findings propose a significant degree of food neophobia among the participants, which is reliable with the conceptualization of food neophobia as a personality trait characterized by an inclination for recognizable foods over novel ones (Pliner & Salvy, 2006). This propensity to avoid unfamiliar foods is associated with broader literature, which implies that tourists often show a preference for foods they are accustomed to while resisting the opportunity to sample local varieties (Yuan et al., 2020; Duan et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the lowest mean score was testified for the statement regarding respondents' willingness to constantly sample new and different foods and their preference for food from different countries (M = 5.44, SD = 1.57) and (M = 5.44, SD = 1.57), respectively. This reflects a lower level of food neophilia, or the tendency to embrace novel and diverse food experiences. Together, food neophobia and food neophilia represent two key psychological factors influencing travelers' inclination to try local foods while traveling (Cheung & Kwan, 2021; Tarinc et al., 2023; Ledesma-Chaves et al., 2024).

Objective 2: To examine the factors that influenced most international travelers' food selection towards Malaysian local food

Based on Table 5, the most influential factor is the motivational factor (β= .819) as compared to the psychological factors. This variable gave the strongest contribution to explain the dependent variable when the variance explained by all other variables in the model is controlled for. Psychological factors (β= -1.262) contributed less to travelers' preferences. Nevertheless, both motivational factors and psychological factors contributed significantly to the prediction of the dependent variable ($p<0.05$) (Pallant, 2005). Motivational and psychological factors:-motivational is the most influential factor as compared to the other one.

Table 5: The Mean Score of Respondents Motivational and Psychological

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Motivational factors	398	5.32	.819
Psychological factors	398	4.51	.740

Motivational factors are typically more prominent than psychological factors in determining tourist behavior. In tourism, motivation refers to internal psychological desires that drive individuals to travel or remain in tourist undertakings, such as cultural experiences, relaxation, or adventure (Ryan & Deci, 2020). While psychological factors like attitudes and perceptions also play a role, it is the motivation that primarily stimulates the desire to travel and participate in tourism (Gursoy et al., 2021). Understanding these motivations is essential for tourism marketers to fascinate and engage tourists.

5. Conclusion

Although this study provides treasured insights into the perceptions of international travelers visiting Malaysia, it also has several restraints that should be deliberated. The outcomes offer meaningful and interesting results, but some challenges were encountered during data collection. The research was primarily aimed at international travelers in the Kuala Lumpur area; nonetheless, participation was inadequate by travelers who were unwilling to participate in the survey, as they chose to spend quality time with family and friends and expressed a lack of interest in participating.

Furthermore, the study concentrated wholly on Asian tourists. According to the Malaysian Tourism Board (2023), Asian tourists make up the major demographic of international visitors to Malaysia, yet the sample lacked adequate representation from Western tourists. Comprising a broader range of international visitors, predominantly from Western countries, would likely boost the generalizability and dependability of the findings.

Besides that, the geographic scope of the study was narrowed to specific urban areas, such as Bukit Bintang and Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), due to logistical limits such as weather conditions and time limitations. Expanding the data collection to other areas, such as the Klang Valley and Selangor region, would provide a more wide-ranging view of international tourists' pictures and experiences.

Next, forthcoming studies could benefit from a broader consideration of Malaysia’s diverse food offerings, particularly those from minority ethnic groups, such as the Baba-Nyonya cuisine and indigenous food from the Borneo region. This would offer a more nuanced understanding of travelers' perceptions of Malaysian food. Moreover, further research should explore the actual consumption patterns of international travelers about local food, to determine whether perceptions align with actual behavior. This would provide a more comprehensive picture of the role that food plays in shaping the inclusive tourism experience in Malaysia.

Apart from various limitations, the findings of this study denote that the mass of international travelers observe Malaysia as offering not only a variety of tourism activities and products, but also an exceptional selection of food, beverages, and food culture, which serve as substantial attractions. This perception highlights the potential of local Malaysian cuisine to act as a catalyst for boosting the local economy. Considering these findings, it is obvious that business operators, tourism-related organizations (such as travel agencies and non-governmental organizations), and government bodies (including the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture and Arts) should recognize the value of this trend and take proactive measures to promote Malaysian cuisine to international travelers. Such culinary offerings could serve as key "pull factors" in attracting tourists to Malaysia.

The cooperation and coordination amongst travel agencies, food service operators, government organizations, and other investors is obligatory for augmenting the "total tourism experience" for international tourists. Without an integrated approach to endorsing Malaysia’s rich culinary heritage, the potential of these tourism products may remain underutilized.

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