

Exploring International Students' Perceptions of Malaysian Gastronomy: A Qualitative Study

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i10/23098> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i10/23098

Published Date: 29 October 2024

Abstract

Objectives of this study is to explore international students' perceptions towards Malaysian food. This review is aimed at gaining a better understanding on the view about Malaysian food by international students. Qualitative method was employed for this study in conducting research of international students at one of the private universities in Malaysia. The results taken from deep interviews based on students' opinions of Malaysian cuisine, the pattern in food selection involving types of Malaysian foods taken and the food acceptance that led to any when making decision about consuming the food. The findings indicate that Malaysian cuisine is good, and international students had a beneficial impact on local food acceptability. Their pleasant views towards Malaysian food were thus assumed to be related to the value of culinary tourism benefits in a similar way, with authenticity motivated closely followed by originality and diversity. The findings could thus offer a local menu that can be maintained to meet the expectations of international students who want nothing but authentic and traditional Malaysian meals. For future research, researchers propose replicating the methodology with a larger sample size and other participant groups in private and public universities.

Keywords: Food Experience, Food Acceptance, Local Food, International Students, Culture

Introduction

Food is an important aspect of cultural identity and social integration, when people are away from their places of origin, and it contributes to the making of promising subjects in varies multidisciplinary research. With the globalization of education, places like Malaysia are becoming more desirable locations for international students to pursue their study. As these students immerse themselves in Malaysian society, they face the task of adjusting to local food, which boasts a rich tapestry of flavors influenced by the country's broad cultural background.

This study seeks to analyze the adaption process of international students in Malaysia as they manage their food choices within the framework of cultural integration. It specifically investigates how sensory perceptions, and cultural comparisons alter their experiences with Malaysian cuisine, influencing their culinary acceptability and assimilation into Malaysian society.

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). This make people chose to come to Malaysia as it is somewhat that close to them and offer unique experience. However, there is a scarcity of comprehensive research that especially investigates the sensory sensations and cultural tensions encountered by overseas students while interacting with local culinary traditions. While prior research has identified a variety of characteristics influencing meal choices, including taste and cleanliness (Collier et al., 2021), little emphasis has been paid to how these experiences shape students' adaption processes in Malaysia's multicultural setting.

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. As Malaysia attracts more foreign tourists and students, understanding the subtleties of food culture becomes increasingly important. This study intends to fill this vacuum by offering insights into how international students reconcile their gastronomic tastes with the local food culture, so adding to their overall cultural adjustment and well-being.

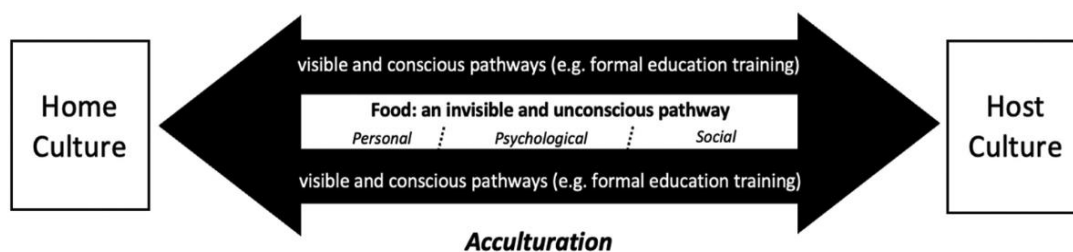


Figure 1. Personal, psychological, and social aspects of food and acculturation *Rui He (2024)*, based on previous studies by *Ciliotta-Rubery (2016)* and *Hartwell, Edwards, and Brown (2011)*.

Review of Literature

Dining Experience

While foreign students embark on a new trip by going across borders, their eating habits change, which has a big impact on their overall perceptions and satisfaction with the new surroundings. These students' reactions to the food they eat are influenced not only by their physical state and the flavor of the food, but also by factors such as prior experiences, culinary knowledge, and attitudes and beliefs (Omar et al., 2015). For these international students, the traditional dishes and cultural history of Malaysia offer a unique culinary experience.

Experience With Regional Cuisine

Lam et al (2017), underlined the importance of regional cuisine in increasing Malaysia's appeal as a tourism destination in their study of the Baba and Nyonya cultures through the eyes of food tourists. The impact of Malaysian food culture on overseas students' integration into the local community and interactions as temporary residents must be understood. According to Corcoran (2018), photovoice techniques were utilized to analyze international students' food preferences and learn more about their nutritional acculturation. The study found that large changes in eating habits are common among overseas students.

Sensory Reactions

Sensory perceptions and cultural integration are important when studying abroad. The international students need to understand the reaction towards the Malaysian cuisine. According to Hidayah Abd. Rahman (2018), tourists' sensory experiences in Melaka, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is one of the key literatures that leads to a discovery better understanding of sensory reactions.

Perceptions from the studies on sensory tourism (Hidayah Abd. Rahman, 2018) and student satisfaction (Hamiza Hamzah & Abdullah, 2018) Lay the framework for future study on the sensory components of cultural adaptation. This is crucial for enhancing international students' overall experience in a multicultural environment.

Cross-Cultural Food Comparison Among International Students

The eating habits and preferences reflect the different cultural backgrounds of international students in Malaysia with their own countries. According to Ali and Tan (2020), students from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa adapt to Malaysian food, which is significantly influenced by local Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures. This contributes to the changes in their eating habits dramatically.

According to Chowdhury and Wong (2019), international students' perceptions and reactions to local food are influenced by their cultural preferences, they tend to choose to eat comfort food at home or explore new places that interest them. Lim and Sulaiman (2021) further investigate how the halal food business in Malaysia serves Muslim abroad students, particularly from Indonesia and the Middle East, promoting simpler meals for their daily consumptions.

International Students Experience Different Food Practices Across Cultures

Food traditions are an essential aspect of one's cultural heritage, and adapting to unfamiliar food settings can present difficulties for students studying abroad. Nguyen and Rahman (2020), discovered that international students frequently participate in shared cooking and dining experiences to stay connected to their native cultures. This custom is especially popular among students with African and South Asian heritage, where communal dining holds cultural importance. Wong and Khalid (2018), detail how students living in university dorms often establish social circles centered around common cultural or culinary interests, fostering a feeling of inclusion through shared meals.

On the other hand, Park and Abdullah (2019), emphasize that students from regions where Malaysian ingredients are not commonly found, such as Europe or North America, may have difficulty recreating traditional dishes and encounter challenges locating familiar items.

Eating Habit Diversity Among International Students

Foreign students frequently face culture shock when they are exposed to Malaysian cuisine because of the strange tastes, seasonings, or ways of cooking. Ibrahim and Thomas (2021), discovered that non-Asian students, like those from Africa or Europe, often struggle with the spiciness or unfamiliar taste of local cuisine. Numerous students slowly acclimate, although the adaptation can differ greatly based on their previous experience with Asian food.

According to Kim and Hashim (2019), found that Korean students living in Malaysia, despite being familiar with aspects of Asian food culture, tend to favor their traditional meals and frequently visit Korean restaurants or grocery stores for their meals.

Adaptation of Food Habits in International Students

Food acculturation is when foreign students in Malaysia adopt local food practices into their eating habits. Zhang and Liew (2020), explain how students from Western nations like Australia or Canada typically experience food acculturation phases, starting with rejecting local cuisine, then experimenting with it, and finally including Malaysian dishes like nasi lemak and roti canai in their everyday meals.

Patel and Kumar (2019), suggest that international students from South Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds may have an easier time adapting to Malaysian cuisine because of the similar spices and cooking techniques used, but they still prefer home-cooked meals or traditional dishes from their own culture whenever possible.

Cuisine Variations and International Students

The variety of food options in Malaysia allows international students to try different Asian and worldwide dishes. Fernando and Wong (2020), emphasize that Malaysia offers international students a wide range of culinary choices through its plentiful street food and multicultural restaurants, though these may not always cater to everyone's cultural tastes. Students from Western nations often struggle with the many rice and seafood dishes available, while students from India or Pakistan may take comfort in the numerous Indian Muslim eateries serving familiar food.

Lim and Ahmad (2021), explain that the variety of Malaysian cuisine enables international students to try different foods, while having access to familiar home-cooked meals helps them feel comfortable during their adjustment period.

Food Acceptance Among International Students in Malaysia

Food acceptance among international students depends on factors such as cultural familiarity, religious dietary restrictions, and personal preferences. Lee and Ali (2019), found that students from Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan find it easier to accept Malaysian food because of the halal certification system, which ensures that food meets their religious requirements. Gibson and Tan (2020), suggest that, while many students eventually accept local food, they retain a strong loyalty to their home cuisine, prompting them to seek out international or specialty stores for familiar products.

Rahman and Chong (2022), note that food acceptance can also be influenced by the social setting, with international students more willing to try local dishes when introduced by

local friends or during university-sponsored cultural events. This exposure enhances their willingness to incorporate Malaysian cuisine into their diet, which enriches their overall cultural experience.

Food Preferences and their Role in Eating Habits

According to Ali and Lim (2021), international students in Malaysia prefer traditional dishes from their native countries. Chen and Ahmad (2020), and Fernando and Chong (2019), found that international students are increasingly incorporating local cuisine into their daily meals. Furthermore, Goh and Lee (2020), investigated how international students adjust to local eating customs, while Nguyen and Rahman (2021), highlighted the difficulties of matching dietary preferences to area food.

Acceptance and Adaptation of Cultural Cuisine

According to the study, Abdullah and Zhang (2020) highlighted the acceptability of food across cultural boundaries and the integration of cuisine among international students studying abroad, and their findings are consistent with those of Chowdhury and Tan (2019), who stated the impact of culture on dietary preferences when students are away from their home country.

Hashim and Lim (2021), investigated the idea of gastronomic acculturation in their study, noting how international students progressively adopt native food habits. In accordance with Jiang and Wong (2020), dietary customs might be adjusted to account for cultural differences, while Kumar and Ali's (2019), study found that different international student groups had distinct food consumption habits.

Comparison of Food Taste and Satisfaction

Chong and Fernando (2021), studied how international students feel about local food and the finding varied opinions due to different cultural preferences in the food taste. According to Ibrahim and Patel (2020), variations in food satisfaction due to cultural differences, specifically focusing on Malaysia taste. Lim and Ahmed (2021), investigated the differences in food tastes between international students' home countries and local Malaysian cuisine, which makes acceptance of the food among international students challenging. In addition, Rahman and Wong (2019), studied food cravings, while Tan and Zhang (2020), examined changes in taste perception and satisfaction as time passed. As a result, gaining pleasure with new cuisine becomes difficult and unsatisfactory in a while when studying in Malaysia.

Readiness to Embrace Native Dishes

Ahmad and Kim (2021) discovered that foreign students in Malaysia were more and more open to adopting the local eating customs. Chung and Wong (2020) emphasized a change in students' culinary preferences, whereas Kaur and Lee (2020) investigated the acceptance of new trends.

Research Methods

A total of 5 respondents were interviewed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, comprising international students from different nations who are not familiar with the local food but well known about Malaysia with multi racial and culture. For this study, a qualitative

method was used where data were collected through focus group discussions among university students which is a method to collect experiential information (Morse, 1994).

Throughout the process, notes were recorded based on firsthand observations and interview data were cross-examined considering emerging themes. The qualitative methodology provides a flexible means of delving into a relatively unexplored subject with limited preliminary information, affording a more profound exploration of the evolving gastronomic scene.

Instruments Development

Two (2) instruments for analysis were adopted in this study. Instrument 1: Experiences with Malaysian Food and Instrument 2: Acceptance of Malaysian Food.

Instrument 1:

The study focuses on the experiences of international students with Malaysian food which covers on encounters, sensory reactions, and cultural comparisons. All these are central to understanding their food experiences.

From this instrument qualitative feedback from international students about their initial experiences with Malaysian cuisine were being collected. The aims is to gauge the satisfaction levels and interest of the international students in further exploring Malaysian dishes. Additionally, the assessment records each student's first encounter with a Malaysian dish to analyze commonalities and differences in their choices.

Instrument 2

This instrument determines the acceptance of Malaysian food by the international students. It focused on food acceptance where the themes related to food preferences and dietary habits, cultural food acceptance. Here's how the responses align with the keywords and themes:

This checklist aims to provide insights into the acceptance and integration of Malaysian food into the dietary habits of international students, offering a structured approach to understanding their culinary preferences and habits.

Results and Discussion

For the current research there are two findings that been discussed: (1) Experiences with Malaysian Food and (2) Acceptance of Malaysian Food.

Experiences with Malaysian Food

In this study there are five participants in the focus group into the themes of encounters with local food, sensory reactions, and cultural comparisons.

Encounters with Local Food

International students frequently have a distinct set of difficulties when they try local food for the first time. Many described their first encounters with Malaysian cuisine as both intimidating and exhilarating. Dishes like Nasi Lemak, for example, that combine coconut rice with peanuts and sambal, were often cited as memorable first experiences. The intricacy of flavors and the application of herbs and spices, which diverge greatly from the more basic elements they were used to in their native countries, surprised the students. This first encounter marks a turning point in their culinary adventure and the start of their assimilation into a new food culture.

"The fried rice and chicken, nasi goreng, was decent enough. I was surprised to find such high-quality meals.

"I believe I recall our first encounter going to this restaurant... I had no idea what was on my plate, but when I ate it, it was delicious and truly memorable. I just want to eat Malaysian food from now on, never fast food again.

"My first meal in Malaysia was nasi lemak, which was also my first experience. When eaten with rice, the kacang (peanuts) were incredibly crispy and delicious.

Sensory Reactions

Sensory experiences play a pivotal role in shaping food preferences and acceptance. The international students described their reactions to the taste, aroma, and texture of Malaysian dishes. Many noted that the sweetness and aromatic qualities of local food were initially overwhelming but became appealing over time. For example, one student remarked on the fragrant spices used in Malaysian cooking, which contrasted sharply with the more straightforward flavors of their native cuisine. This sensory adaptation is *crucial, as it influences their willingness to incorporate local dishes into their daily meals.*

"It was sweet, but I liked it... the aromatic fragrant smell of Malaysian food... the spices make it quite interesting."

"At first, I couldn't eat because it was too sweet for me. But when I learned to cook Malaysian food, I found the herbs and spices interesting... our country uses only simple ingredients like garlic and onion."

"The rice (in nasi lemak) tastes different because it's coconut rice. The sauce is small, but you don't need a lot... it was different from how we eat in India."

Cultural Comparisons

Cultural comparisons emerged as a significant theme in understanding food acceptance. Students often reflected on the differences between Malaysian cuisine and their own cultural food practices. For instance, while Indian students were accustomed to a variety of vegetables accompanying rice, they found the portion sizes and ingredient combinations in dishes like Nasi Lemak to be quite different. Such comparisons not only highlight the diversity of culinary practices but also underscore the students' efforts to reconcile their home food traditions with the new culinary landscape they are navigating.

"In our country, we use simple ingredients like garlic and onion. Ginger, we only put in certain foods. But here, they use a lot of herbs and spices, which makes it more interesting."

"In India, we eat rice with a lot of vegetables like sabji or dhal in a big bowl, but when I tried nasi lemak, there were just peanuts and a small sauce, which was surprising to me."

"In India, we're used to having a whole bowl of dhal or vegetables with rice, but in Malaysia, the portion sizes and ingredients are different."

Instrument 2: Acceptance of Malaysian Food

Acceptance towards Malaysian Food

Students' acceptance of Malaysian cuisine differed based on their openness to try new tastes and willingness to embrace experimentation. Numerous international students claimed that including local cuisine in their meals, with some eating Malaysian dishes multiple times per week, enabled them to become more accepting of Malaysian food.

While several international students preferred their home cuisine, implying that while they like Malaysian food, it did not fully satisfy their appetites. This nature underlines the intricate connection that international students have with the meals, as they balance their identities and cultural connections while incorporating new culinary experiences into their eating habits.

Food Preferences and Integration into Dietary Habits

This theme explores how international students incorporate Malaysian cuisine into their daily meals. It highlights the frequency of local food consumption and the extent to which students adopt local dishes, reflecting their openness to new culinary experiences.

"For dessert maybe yes, for the main course I will consider it, but my main meal will be Myanmar food."

"I would always... I feel like it was my go-to option when I go to a restaurant, instead of going to fast food places, I would rather choose Malaysian food."

"Yeah sure for lunch I would love to eat Malaysian food."

Cultural Food Acceptance and Adaptation

This theme focuses on the students' ability to accept and adapt to local food cultures. It examines how their culinary choices evolve as they navigate the differences between their home cuisines and Malaysian food, emphasizing the willingness to embrace new flavors and cooking methods.

"Definitely I will accept Malaysian food... since I tasted Malaysian food, I feel like it's my go-to option."

"Malaysian food is not satisfying me that much... the taste is totally different from Sri Lanka... after I leave Malaysia, I don't think I'll eat it as my daily food."

Food Satisfaction and Taste Comparison

This theme analyzes the satisfaction levels of international students with Malaysian cuisine compared to their traditional foods. It highlights cultural differences in food satisfaction and the process of taste adaptation, as students learn to appreciate the unique flavors and ingredients used in Malaysian dishes.

"It's a difficult question, because I miss my Sri Lankan food, and the taste of Malaysian food is totally different from Sri Lanka."

"The Indian food here is not that spicy, so we crave spicier food."

Willingness to Adopt Local Cuisine

Students who actively pursued Malaysian cuisine frequently perceived it as an avenue to greater cultural awareness and societal integration. The willingness to taste local cuisine enables students from other countries to adapt to a new culture.

The international students not only developed the cooking talents by sharing meals and attending food related events but also developed connections with locals. The ability to adapt to local culinary traditions emphasize cultural gaps, allowing international students to have a more diversified and inclusive experience.

"I would choose to pick Malaysian food over fast food."

"I love to eat Malaysian food for lunch, but my main meal will still be from my home country."

Conclusions

The study's findings provide valuable insights into the complex relationships between international students and Malaysian food, highlighting their encounters with and acceptance of local cuisine as a crucial element of their cultural adjustment. Respondents shared experiences characterized by a mix of excitement and concern as they navigated new flavors and ingredients. Sensory experiences such as spicy scents and varied textures significantly influenced their eating preferences and dislikes.

Culinary experiences became more challenging as students made cultural comparisons between Malaysian and their traditional meals, shaping their attempts to integrate their culinary heritage into the diverse Malaysian food landscape. Despite differing levels of acceptance, many expressed a willingness to incorporate Malaysian food into their diets, signaling a positive step towards culinary diversity. This contrast in experiences underscores the ongoing connection to their national cuisines, illustrating that food acceptance is a dynamic process influenced by personal willingness to explore new products.

Overall, this study enhances the understanding of cultural adaptation processes by demonstrating how food fosters cultural interaction and adjustment among international students in Malaysia. The findings are particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where the multicultural society can benefit from fostering environments that stimulate culinary exploration while allowing students to maintain their cultural heritage. Additionally, this research supports the goals of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), highlighting the importance of inclusive and sustainable dietary habits. Comprehending these dynamics can aid in constructing more supportive frameworks for international students, ultimately enriching their study experience in Malaysia.

Moreover, this investigation supports the goals of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) through the encouragement of inclusive and sustainable behaviors in dietary habits and cultural assimilation. Comprehending these forces can aid in constructing

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