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## Examining Local Traditional Food Entrepreneurs in Selangor and Sabah States during Covid 19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The study aims to explore local entrepreneurs' profile criteria during covid 19 pandemic in Sabah and Selangor states. Two (2) themes have been identified for this study which are 1) Food category and 2) Business criteria. Twenty (20) informants from selected business categories are being identified and interviewed using a semi-structured question and online video and phone recording due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The finding shows that entrepreneurs from both states share similarities in food categories and customer backgrounds. They also implement technology such as online delivery applications to sustain their business during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Business criteria, Food category, Local entrepreneur, Traditional food

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### 1.0 Introduction

Food is central to our sense of identity, especially in a group eating ritual, as it asserts diversity, hierarchy, and organisation. Food is also central to individual identity, which is constructed biologically, psychologically, and socially by the food he/she incorporates (Fischler, 1988). Food also has been starting as a central field in cultural communication, for example, in economic and political terms, using traditional food to create a regional identity (Telsstrom et al., 2006). Food has also been incorporated into the culture and identity of a nation; it is shaped and moulded by factors such as social background, language and beliefs (Moginon et al., 2012; Ratnasingam, 2010). With the mentioned factors, nations could establish and define their country identity, especially their food identity.

### 2.0 Local Entrepreneur Background

The worldwide tourism sector comprises micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), SMEs represent around 80 per cent of all tourism enterprises worldwide (Kukanja et al., 2020). Furthermore, SMEs account for over 90 per cent of all business entities in the EU (Secinaro et al., 2020). Small and medium enterprises

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(SMEs) are entrepreneurs that need to meet the government's criteria, such as the number of employees and turnover (Gvelesiani et al., 2020). The criteria are different depending on each country. In Malaysia, small enterprises must have employees from 5 to less than 30; meanwhile, medium enterprises are 30 to at most 75 employees (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006); compared to Georgia, USA, the total number of employees for small businesses is 50 and for medium enterprises is 249 (Gvelesiani et al., 2020). Furthermore, in Canada, SMEs need fewer than 500 employees and less than \$50 million in annual revenues (Ibanescu et al., 2019). SMEs play a vital role in the country's industrial development. In Malaysia, SMEs concentrate on textile and apparel, food, and beverage (e.g., traditional food), metal and metal products sectors. Furthermore, the food and beverage sector contributes the highest output in SMEs. The food and beverage sector covering the service sector is usually run by small proprietorships and family-run businesses (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006). Manufacturing and services are the two sectors in which SMEs usually participate. One of the service sectors is the tourist industry which is usually related to the food business, such as traditional food products (Banterle et al., 2010; Saad et al., 2021) and food and beverage business, examples like hotels, restaurants and other foodservice businesses (Megawan et al., 2021).

### 2.1 Food Heritage Relation with Covid 19

Local food enriches the international tourists' experience to repeat consumption in future gastronomy trips in Malaysia (Saad et al., 2019). Saad et al. (2019) suggested that restaurants improve the local food presentation and provide *kueh* (local snacks) as a dessert or light food at night selling for the international market. In promoting gastronomic tourism to international tourists, Singapore unrelentingly proclaims some common Chinese, Indian, Malays and Peranakan food as their local heritage. This can be seen in their tourism promotional packages under the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which classify dishes like *Ayam Buah Keluak*, *Bak Kut Teh*, *Cendol*, *Char Kway Teow*, *Chilli Crab*, *Laksa*, *Nasi Lemak*, *Rendang*, *Teh Tarik* and others as Singapore's 'iconic' dishes (Chaney & Ryan, 2012). In addition, the originality of these foods, as portrayed in the celebrated food festivals held in this country, is self-proclaiming. Like other intangible cultures, rituals, customs, and festivals have also been asserted as their country's identity (Bedi, 2012).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to changes in heritage food choices and consumer habits (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to modifications in the food system, such as the purchasing process, preparation, packaging, distribution, and access to food. Colombia, which prioritises corn-dough heritage foods such as *tamales*, *champus* and *empanadas* for dietary purposes, have reduced the intake of such foods (Gomez-Corona et al., 2021). This is because of the fear of people who think that heritage foods such as corn that involve contact with the food processor may spread a contagious covid-19 epidemic. In addition, many food operators that provide heritage food decreased in produce and sold heritage products due to the closure of premises during the pandemic (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). Thus, this has indirectly resulted in the development of heritage foods stalling during this covid-19 pandemic crisis (Megawan et al., 2021). Therefore, the study aims to explore local entrepreneurs' profile criteria in Sabah and Selangor states during the pandemic.

## 3.0 Methodology

The qualitative approach was employed using a semi-structured interview reviewed and finalised by peer review from the academic's background. An alteration has been made based on their suggestion. The key informants for the qualitative method are local entrepreneurs that sold traditional food listed under national food heritage from Selangor and Sabah states. Around ten (10) informants from each state have been identified and interviewed for this research, representing various categories of local entrepreneurs from the stall, restaurant, SME and home-based businesses. Berg (2004) argued that five (5) to twenty (20) key informants for the qualitative study approach are sufficient. Informants Selangor entrepreneurs' locations are concentrated in the Klang Valley area, such as Meru, Shah Alam, Puncak Alam and Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, Sabah entrepreneurs' locations are in Kota Kinabalu areas such as Kingfisher, Telipok, Kinarut, Putatan Karamuning and Kepayan.

The identified informants from Selangor and Sabah entrepreneurs had been invited via telephone and email to gain their willingness to participate in the study. Upon agreement, the researcher conducted the interviews. Twenty (20) informants agreed to be interviewed individually within the study's time frame from October 2020 to December 2021. The interview dates and times are arranged based on the convenience of the informants. The research aims to ensure confidentiality, develop trust, and encourage the interviewee to provide complete information voluntarily. The key informants' names will not be revealed. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, all interviews using online video and telephone are being tape-recorded, and each session lasts between thirty (30) to forty (40) minutes.

Semi-structured interview questions for the qualitative approach that aligns with the study's objectives have been adapted and developed based on several literatures (Ramli et al., 2015; Md Ramli et al., 2016). Ten (10) semi-structured questions were developed and used in the interview session. The semi-structured question for the interview is an open-ended question to obtain in-depth and detailed information. To easily understand and explain the in-depth interview, *Bahasa Malaysia* or English was used as a medium language during the interview and translated into English during the transcribing process. Using three steps, categorisation, coding, and evaluation as analytical tools. An interview is transcribed and transformed. The transcribed interviews were categorised using the scheme of emerged categories, allowing the contents to be systemically verified (Tellström et al., 2006). The interviewed data have been categorised using Atlas. ti, a scientific software development for qualitative data analysis that facilitates the description, analysis and interpretation of research data collected through unstructured or semi-structured data collection methods. Comparison of these two states would give more understanding of the sameness or differences profiles that represent each local entrepreneur and help to improve the business whether in technology applications or method of business.

## 4.0 Results and Discussion

Twenty (20) informants were asked 'The type of food that is being sold?' and "Business and customer profile" during the interview session. The finding showed two (2) themes: Food category and Business criteria. The following paragraph will explain the informant profile and coding under each theme.

### 4.1 Informant profile

Twenty (20) informants were involved in the interview. All informants are 30 to 71 years old with various business food categories backgrounds such as restaurants, stalls, Home-based catering and small and medium enterprises (SME). The informants have business experience from three (3) to twenty-four (24) years. There is a difference in business experiences between Selangor and Sabah informants in the traditional food business. The only differences for Selangor informants are mostly Malays and Sabah informants have different ethnic backgrounds, such as Dusun, Jawa, Brunei, Bajau and Bugis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Informant background

Informant	Business Categories	Age	Ethnic	No. of years in Business
PRSG 1	Restaurant	-	Melayu	23
PRSG 2	Restaurant	52	Melayu	22
PGSG 3	Stalls	56	Melayu	10
PGSG 4	Stalls	67	Melayu	3
PGSG 5	Stalls	61	Melayu	24
PGSG 6	Stalls	40	Melayu	22
PGSG 7	Stalls	48	Melayu	4
PHSG 8	Homebased catering	56	Melayu	7
PHSG 9	Homebased catering	37	Melayu	7
PHSB 1	Homebased catering	30	Dusun	2
PGSB 4	Stalls	32	Jawa	8
PGSB 6	Stalls	52	Dusun	5
PRSB 7	Restaurant	55	Melayu	7
PRSB 8	Restaurant	31	Brunei	10
PRSB 9	Restaurant	71	Bajau	7
PRSB 10	Restaurant	34	Bajau	7
PRSB 11	Restaurant	25	Bugis	13
PSMESB 1	SME	49	Dusun	5
PSMESB 2	SME	36	Dusun	6
PSMESB 5	SME	44	Dusun	7

\* SG- Selangor, SB- Sabah

### 4.2 Theme: Food category

Under the theme Food category, two codes have been identified: 1) categories of food and 2) type of food, as shown in Table 2.

#### i. Categories of food

The Selangor informant that is restaurant owners (PRSG) sold gravies and accompaniments, rice, and appetiser categories. In contrast, stalls and home-based catering informants (PRSG and PHSG) concentrate on the cake, porridge, dessert, appetiser, and beverage categories. Meanwhile, Sabah informants from home-based, stall and restaurant informants (PHSB, PGSB and PRSB) concentrate on cake, porridge & dessert, rice, gravies, and accompaniments categories compare with SME informants (PSMESB) focusing on selling food under appetiser, gravies and accompaniments, cake, porridge and dessert categories. The food categories under National heritage referred to Jabatan Warisan Negara (Ramli et al., 2016).

#### ii. Type of food

Table 2 shows the type of food sold by the Selangor and Sabah entrepreneurs, which covers a variety of traditional food from nasi lemak towards cendol and dessert cakes. It shows the informants sold various food (e.g., *Nasi lemak*, *Curry*, *Sambal goreng*, *Kuih Akok*) or concentrated one dish, such as *Satay* and *Cendol*, with most dishes under the National food heritage list (Ramli et al., 2016).

Table 2: Categories of food based on informant's profile.

Informant	Categories	Type of food
PRSG 1	Gravies & Accompaniments	Masak Lemak, Rebung Perut, Masak Lemak Daging Salai Dan Gulai
PRSG 2	Rice; Appetiser	Lontong, Nasi Minyak, Soto, Nasi Briyani, Sambal Goreng, Tempe

PGSG 3	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Kuih Talam Koci
PGSG 4	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Murtabak
PGSG 5	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Pau, Donut, Keria, Kasturi, Ketayap, Lempeng, Karipap, Bingka
PGSG 6	Appetiser	Ubi, Kuih Koci, Pulut Panggang
PGSG 7	Beverage	Satay Cendol
PHSG 8	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Kuih Akok Dan Tepung Pelita
PHSG 9	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Kuih Talam Tradisional, Kuih Seri Muka, Kualu Kacang, Kuih Lapis, Cara Berlauk, Nona Manis, Popia Cereal.
PHSB 1	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Tausi Homemade, Bambanggan, Hinava
PGSB 4	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Kuih Sapit, Kuih Jala
PGSB 6	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Hinava, Tuhau, Ambuyat
PRSB 7	Rice, Gravies & Accompaniments	Nasi Lemak, Curry gravies, Umbut pisang
PRSB 8	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Cendol, Kuih Muih
PRSB 9	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	Ambuyat, Ikan Ampap
PRSB 10	Cake, Porridge & Dessert; Gravies & Accompaniments	Hinava, Ikan Bakar, Latok, Agal-Agal
PRSB 11	Rice, Gravies & Accompaniments	Chicken Rice, Ikan bakar, Nasi Kuning
PSMESB 1	Appetiser	Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada
PSMESB 2	Cake, Porridge & Dessert; Gravies & Accompaniments	Serunding Tuhau, Bambanggan
PSMESB 5	Appetiser	Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada

This finding shows both Selangor and Sabah informants covering a variety of food categories from rice, gravies and accompaniments, appetiser, cake porridge and dessert and beverage. Nevertheless, as for the type of food, Selangor informants concentrate mainly on Malay dishes, while Sabah informants covering not multiple ethnic dishes such as Brunei, Kadazandusun, Jawa, Dusun, Bajau, Malay, and Chinese. They represent the region of Sabah as well as Malaysian cuisine.

#### 4.3 Theme 2: Business criteria

For the theme under the business criteria category, three (3) codes have been identified: 1) experience, 2) customer profile, and 3) type of business, as shown in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

##### *I Experience*

Selangor informants have run the traditional food business for 24 to 4 years, as shown in Table 1. The most experienced in the business are restaurant owners (PRSG) and stall owners (PGSG). Table 3 shows the statement of informants from stall owners in Selangor states stating how they gain experience in the business, such as learning from their relative experience in the same business (PGSG7).

Table 3: Informants Experiences

"... the origin of it is actually aunt's mother, who has already been making this cendol for a long time, about ten years..."	Informant PGSG 7
"... I started selling satay in the year 2000, if I'm not mistaken, about 20 years .. more or less..."	Informant PGSG 6
"... for the kuih the ladies started it, family recipes... some of the recipes are used for these products..."	Informant PRSB 8
"... within the past 4 years, for the <i>bambanggan</i> pickle... we only make them during the bambangan season..."	Informant PSMESB 2

Meanwhile, Sabah informants started their traditional food business between 13 and 2 years, which is relatively young compared with Selangor informants, as shown in Table 1, and they produce and sell traditional food due to utilizing their heritage backgrounds, such as continuing the family recipes and their knowledge on local ingredients. Informants PRSB 8, restaurant owners using family recipes, produce traditional food for their restaurant. As for the informant, PSMESB 2 is an SME business owner that sells pickle products using local ingredients such as *bambanggan* pickles, which are daily consumption by the local consumer such as Kadazandusun, Dusun and any other ethnic that consume bambangan in Sabah as shown in Table 3.

##### *ii Customer profile*

From the finding, the researcher identified that Selangor and Sabah have similar customer backgrounds; both states have local customers not only from local areas but also from other states that are coming to eat on their premises or buy their food. Some business owners also have international customers from overseas, such as tourists, as shown in Table 4. Informants PFSG 3 state that most

customers, such as Melaka, are local within Selangor and outside the state. PRSG1 stated that their customers are not only the local customer from the office area nearby the restaurant but also international customers from tourists who come to the establishment because the place is near with tourist attraction place. As for Sabah, PHSB 1 is a home-based catering owner with local customers from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Dusun, Malay, Chinese and Indians. While informants PGSB 6 state that their customers are not only local people but also tourists that show interest in food products that have been sold, which can be referred to in Table 2.

Table 4: Customer profile

"...the majority of them are locals... all around it is locals who come they can taste the variety of traditional kuih... from Melaka and those from Shah Alam..."	Informant PGSG 3
"... our visitor are more of the ordinary crowd... we have civil servants, police officers... there are also foreign tourists, quite a number because they visited the bird park... the butterfly park... it is nearby to our restaurants..."	Informant PRSG 1
"...most of the buyers are the Kadazandusun people... but also among the buyers are Malay, Chinese and Indian.. mainly Sabahans... the Dusun people..."	Informant PHSB 1
"...most of the buyers are Dusun people and tourists... they want to try this traditional food because they do not always come here.. they like to try traditional food..."	Informant PGSB 6

Due to the pandemic, the customer profile is more concentrated on the local customer due to the restricted movement (MCO). However, there is still a demand for traditional food, similar to Skalkos et al. (2021) and Petrescu-Mag et al. (2020) finding, who stated that customers would purchase and consume traditional food if they could get access to them.

*i. Type of Business.*

The type of business that Selangor has implemented uses selling at their premises and also using an online application. This can be seen in Table 5, showing informants PGSG 3 and PHSG 8 taking orders in large quantities through catering and hotel events. They also do their delivery. They also implemented online purchasing using WhatsApp due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has limited their movements. As for informants from Sabah, such as PGSB 6 and PSMESB 5, they also use electronic media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, to promote and take orders. They usually deliver to their customers in large quantities.

Table 5: Type of business

"...we are more towards catering and hotels... it is usually in large quantities... such as catering or feasts, events... if it is for a gathering we will deliver it of course... we have our own vehicle for deliveries..."	Informant PGSG 3
"... <i>makcik</i> (aunty) only makes a little... after that anything left over is sold online using Whatapp application because makcik would not put it at the stall..."	Informant PHSG 8
"...we do it ourselves... we make food delivery..yes.. I use Facebook and Whatapp..."	Informant PGSB 6
"...there are two types... the daily and bulk buyers which we send it over with local supermarket... initially I sold via Whatapp to friends and at Tamparuli day market every Wednesday... where I started trading every week..."	Informant PSMESB 5

As you can see from table 1, all informants between 40 to 55 years old showed they used Facebook and WhatsApp as alternative ways to sell their products during the pandemic. It is different from Skalkos et al. (2021), where the customer would buy traditional food product mainly from supermarkets or grocery stores if they had access to the food product, and purchase using online is still very low despite the tendency for more and more online shopping due to the pandemic. It is up to the entrepreneur to decide whether to use the traditional method or technology to sustain their business and attract new customers, as mentioned by Petrescu-Mag et al. (2020) on the preference for online purchases. The understanding of how business methods used during a pandemic by local entrepreneurs, such as technology applications, help sustain their business and even open new markets such as new types of customers. The finding is similar to Bowen (2020); when SMEs understand the factors that influence their attitudes, it facilitates policy development for the company.

**5.0 Conclusion and Summary**

To summarise, both Selangor and Sabah entrepreneurs share similar food categories and business criteria, especially the customer profile and type of business. Although there is a big difference in the experience level in running the business, most Selangor entrepreneurs have more than 24 years of business experience compared with Sabahan entrepreneurs, less than 13 years in selling traditional food products. This may be due to the age of the informants. The youngest Selangor informants are 37 years old, while the youngest age of Sabah informants youngest is 25 years old. Their adaptation to changes during Covid-19 using an online application in this finding is not influenced by age or year of business experience. Interestingly, Selangor and Sabah entrepreneurs' counterparts implement WhatsApp and Facebook or sustain their business during the pandemic. Both states also maintain their local customers and expand their business to new customers due to the online application they adopt. Their businesses selling traditional food continues to

sustain itself during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the country opens its border to international tourists starting in April 2022, it is expected that their traditional food-based business will maintain local and attract international customers due to the type of food they sell, which is a traditional food that is on the national food heritage list. The continuity of this study and documentation of local traditional food-based entrepreneurs is essential to forecast and encourage the sustainability of our cultural heritage.

The limitation of the study is that the informant, especially from Selangor states that are mainly Malay compared with Sabah, which covered variance of ethnicity. This may create bias in interpreting the information covering the multicultural ethnicity in Malaysia. As this is a qualitative method, most of the informants are not necessarily bound to one location as they can be home-based catering businesses or doing online business which may not require a permanent establishment.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper is related to entrepreneurship, tourism, and gastronomy field of study.

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