

12th AMER International Conference on Quality of Life
The Magellan Sutra Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, 26-28 Jan 2024

Exploring the Driving Factors behind Traditional Food Entrepreneurs in Sabah and Selangor

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Abstract

This study explores the key factors influencing local entrepreneurs in Sabah and Selangor states in selling traditional food. Twenty (20) informants from various business categories are identified and interviewed using a qualitative method. The transcript interview is being analysed to develop code and theme. Results showed there are two (2) themes that have been identified: 1) criteria for traditional food (cooking method, flavour, and originality) and 2) demand for traditional food (history, origin of food). Findings show the key factors that drive local entrepreneurs to develop distinctive attractions and become new tourism destinations, especially in traditional food areas.

Keywords: Local entrepreneur; traditional food; comparison, criteria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9i27.5653>

1.0 Introduction

The traditional food industry encompasses history, concepts, ingredients, food preparation, food distribution, events, festivals and medicine (Galli, 2018; Niedbala *et al.*, 2020). Tourism in the food industry is one of the catalysts for attracting tourists. Foreign tourists (e.g., Chinese and Europeans) are attracted to and influenced by local traditional food (Fam *et al.*, 2020). The traditional food industry contributes significantly and has a high potential for development and a positive impact on other sectors, mainly tourism (Rose & Rosmiza, 2018). The traditional food industry usually comes from local entrepreneurs, primarily independent business owners who sell food due to their interests and family business (Ramli *et al.*, 2023).

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1.1 Tourism

Malaysia is known for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. Each ethnic group has its heritage, and each wants to preserve its heritage so that it does not become extinct or forgotten by the younger generation (Ramli et al., 2023). One of the main tourist attractions in Malaysia is the nature, culture, and heritage of its ethnic communities, including traditional food. To develop the service sector further, the government has taken initiatives involving various parties to promote culture, art, and heritage in Malaysia to tourists (Abdullah et al., 2022). However, the economic development plan was expanded again in 2021 after a downturn hit the country. This can be seen especially in the Sabah socio-economic plan which allocates funds to the Sabah Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment (KePKAS) and its departments and agencies to revitalise the tourism industry and stimulate Related Industries (Baco, 2022). This shows that the tourism-based industry is one of the catalysts for most of the service sector and is seen to have the potential to continue to thrive. An individual engaged in the tourism business is known as an entrepreneur (Kukanja et al., 2020). Thus, the Malaysian government has been offering programs to improve SME performance and strengthen businesses. The government has shown proactive actions to enhance the role of SMEs as the backbone of the tourism industry (Nazry & Mapjabil, 2021).

1.2 Small and medium-sized business (SME) relationship with traditional food

Micro, Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) focusing on tourism are categorised according to business activities. Providing food and beverage services is often at the top of the list of activities that SMEs offer tourists. This is because food is a basic necessity and an essential factor in tourists' choice of destination (Osmana & Nazarib, 2020). On the other hand, food has several primary categories, including heritage, local, and traditional food. There is a relationship between food heritage and the development of the tourism industry, whereby the tourism industry has identified food as the main attraction of Tourism and tourist motivation since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Rizkiyah et al., 2022).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to changes in traditional 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 traditional 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 traditional foods such as corn that involve contact during the food process may spread a contagious COVID-19 epidemic. In addition, many food operators that provide heritage food stopped selling heritage products wholesale due to the closure of premises during the pandemic (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). Thus, this has indirectly resulted in the development of traditional food stalling during this COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This raises the challenges to the sustainability of traditional food SMEs after the pandemic crisis (Ramli et al., 2022).

More research needs to be conducted on opportunities and challenges for tourist SME entrepreneurs in the context of the traditional food industry. Researchers constantly fill in the appropriate study gaps to identify industries where tourist SMEs can play an important role (Asthana, 2022; Ramli et al., 2023). Furthermore, some operators provide traditional food-stopping food products following the closure of premises during the pandemic (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). Entrepreneurs of small enterprises need to be protected from large entrepreneurs to defend local food and production because food culture comes from the roots of such food (Niedbala et al., 2020). Therefore, the study aims to explore the key factors influencing local entrepreneurs in Sabah and Selangor states in selling traditional food.

2.0 Methodology

The qualitative approach was employed using a semi-structured interview, which was 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 who sold traditional food listed under national food heritage from the states of Selangor and Sabah. Around twenty (20) informants representing Sabah and Selangor states have been identified for this research from various local entrepreneurs: stalls, restaurants, SMEs, and home-based businesses. The number of informants is acceptable; as Berg (2004) stated, five (5) to twenty (20) key informants for the qualitative study approach are sufficient.

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) and 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 (Md Ramli et al., 2023). 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 understand and explain the in-depth interview easily, *Bahasa Malaysia* or English was used as a medium language 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. It is 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 method.

3.0 Finding and Discussion

Twenty (20) informants were asked 'about the origin of the food', 'the reason for selling the food', 'the difference in production or manufacturing of traditional food', 'the advantages of selling traditional food', and 'when is the highest demand for this food', during the interview session. The finding showed two (2) themes: 1) Criteria on local traditional food (cooking method, flavour, and originality) and 2) Demand for traditional food (history, origin of food). The following paragraph will explain the informant profile and coding under each theme.

3.1 Informant profile

During the interview, twenty (20) informants, who had backgrounds in various food categories such as restaurants, stalls, home-based catering, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were involved. The informants were aged between 30 and 71 years and had business experience ranging from three (3) to twenty-four (24) years. It was observed that there was a difference in business experience between Selangor and Sabah informants in the traditional food business. The Selangor informants mainly were Malays, whereas the Sabah informants had different ethnic backgrounds, such as Dusun, Jawa, Brunei, Bajau, and Bugis, which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Informant background

Code	Categories	Age (until 2022)	Ethnic	Business (until 2022)
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

The Selangor and Sabah informants offer diverse food categories, including rice, gravies, accompaniments, appetisers, cake porridge, desserts, and beverages. However, Selangor informants mainly focus on Malay dishes, whereas Sabah informants cover a variety of ethnic dishes such as Brunei, Kadazandusun, Jawa, Dusun, Bajau, Malay, and Chinese. They represent the region of Sabah as well as Malaysian cuisine. The food categories under the national heritage list are from Jabatan Warisan Negara (Ramli et al., 2020). The types of food sold by the Selangor and Sabah entrepreneurs include a wide variety of traditional food ranging from nasi lemak to cendol and dessert cakes. This indicates that the informants sold a variety of food items (e.g., Nasi lemak, Curry, Sambal goreng, Kuih Akok) or focused on one dish, such as Satay and Cendol, with most of the dishes falling under the National food heritage list (Ramli et al., 2023).

3.2 Theme 1: Criteria on traditional food;

Under the theme, three (3) codes have been identified: 1) cooking method, 2) flavour, and 3) originality that most of the informant mention during interview to relate traditional food that they sell, as shown in Table 2, 3 and 4.

i) Code 1: Cooking Method

Cooking methods are a crucial factor for local entrepreneurs selling traditional food. It determines the business's success and helps build a regular customer base (Wardana et al., 2023). Preparing traditional food requires much effort and is labor-intensive. In the early years of their business, PGSG7 informants manually produced the food (e.g. *cendol*) using traditional methods, which were more labor-intensive and time-consuming. However, as the demand increased, they switched to using machinery for mass production. On the other hand, PRSB9 informants shared their experience in cooking traditional food (e.g. *ambuyat*) using manual methods, which require skills and experience to produce. The statements of informants are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Informant statement on cooking method

"... we used a totally traditional way meaning that we have to go by hand, we cooked it ourselves by hand and we pressed it by hand too so it was totally 100% homemade but at one point when the demand was too high, we could no longer do it by hand because cooking that much cendol by hand hurts, because we can't stir it, we can't stop stirring at all for one hour, nonstop stirring at that. So, at one point we decided to buy machines, so now we have two machines, one to stir the cendol and one to press the cendol..."	Informant PGSG 7
"...must use boiling water, mix the sago with the water, but do not let the mixture gets too runny, you need skills, if it is not done right, you won't be able to eat it..."	Informant PRSB 9

ii) Code 2: Flavour

Another important criterion for the local entrepreneur is the flavour of traditional food, which is essential in maintaining customers and creating the uniqueness and authenticity of the traditional food, which would differentiate one business's products from others (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000). A statement from PGSG 5 states the need to produce food from scratch and consume fresh food as the flavour will differ. PRSB 8 mentions the importance of maintaining traditional flavours as they represent the uniqueness of their product, as mentioned in Table 3.

Table 3. Informant statement on flavour

"... it is from scratch if it is frozen the taste is not as good..."	Informant PGSG 5
"... we maintain the traditional, we maintain the traditional taste..."	Informant PRSB 8

iii) Code 3: Originality

Lastly, under this theme, originality is crucial as it reflects the uniqueness of traditional food, which represents the business. It can be the recipe, cooking method, flavour, or ingredients (Wardana et al., 2023), which is crucial for local entrepreneurs to differentiate themselves from others in the food business. Informants PGSG6 noted the need to have its original taste to differentiate from competitors. Informants PRSB 10 state that using the freshest ingredients (e.g., seafood) would determine the quality and originality of their products, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Informant statement on originality

"...because I keep the original taste of the satay as satay now comes in various types. Some people have modified the taste of the satay itself, so the satay I made is indeed the original taste of satay..."	Informant PGSG 6
"...can maintain the originality by selling only with the freshest ingredients, do not sell food that is not fresh, food quality is the most important. The fish must be fresh, the seafood fresh too, the preparation method does not change, the recipe has never changed, the taste gets better with the additional sambal..."	Informant PRSB 10

3.3 Theme 2: Demand for traditional food

Under these themes, two (2) codes have been identified: 1) history of traditional food, 2) origin of food sold. Most of the informants mentioned during an interview relate to the reason the informant is still selling traditional food, as described in Tables 5 and 6.

i) Code 1: History of traditional food

History plays an important role in giving a symbolic meaning to individual or community history and cultural background and further redefining their identity in the multi-ethnic community in one country; in this study are the local entrepreneurs (Wardana et al., 2023). Informants share the history of traditional food in the origin of the recipe (e.g. *cendol*), which used to be made for family consumption before it was commercialised, as mentioned by PGSG7, for PRSB10 informants associate it with the history of the place (i.e. Semporna and Sandakan) as part of the origin of their traditional food as well as the ingredients such as *latok* and several dishes (i.e. *hinava*, *kinilau*) that are popular in the area as well as ethnicity background as mention in Table 5.

Table 5: Informants relate history to traditional food.

"...the origin of it is actually aunt's mother who have already been making this cendol for a long time, about 10 years. Only it was not commercial then. They have been making it since a long time ago so when people hear about this delicious cendol, they will go to eat it and they will ask the recipe and make it themselves..."	Informant PGSG 7
"...the history about this food, for example grilled fish originates from the east coast, in Semporna and Sandakan regions there are many of those even grilled squids, it's their local dish. Same goes for <i>latok</i> which originates from Semporna. For <i>hinava</i> it is mixed already, the traditional dish is mixed between Semporna and here the Dusun folks calls it <i>hinava</i> , over there they call it <i>kinilau</i> . It is mixed it is from Semporna, KK and the region around here..."	Informant PRSB 10

ii) Code 2: Origin of food

Originality is interrelated with the geographical name of a designated product of origin in a region. It is explained by the fact that the product of the designated region presents a few characteristics of quality and originality that result from geographical influences and human factors (Krajnc et al., 2021); the origin of food in this study focuses on traditional food. From the finding, it is shown that the product they sell is from a specific region (i.e. Kelantan), and the *kuih akok* recipe is from a family legacy based on informant PHSG8

and informant PSMESB1 stated that initially, the traditional food that is sold is practically made for own consumption. However, as there was a request for friends, the informant started to commercialise.

Table 6: Informant relates of origin of food.

".....this kuih akok really originates from Kelantan. Because mak cik is from Kelantan..."	Informant PHSG 8
".....Yes, there are requests, starting from friends, so I think it can be sold, when I initially thought just to eat it on my own..."	Informant PSMESB 1

4.0 Conclusion and Limitation

To summarise, local entrepreneurs identified the main criteria for traditional food in terms of cooking method, flavour, and originality found in both states. The demand for traditional food has been identified in terms of the history of traditional food, and the origin of the food sold is the main reason local entrepreneurs opted for traditional food as their core product. However, there is a big difference in the level of experience in running the business in both states, as most Selangor entrepreneurs have > 24 years of business experience compared with Sabahan entrepreneurs, who have < 13 years in selling traditional food products. They have adapted to the changes, especially in maintaining originality, but have to be innovative in producing traditional food to sustain itself during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on their reason for selling traditional food, traditional food-based businesses can attract local and international customers interested in local traditional food, especially under the national food heritage list. The continuation of exploring and documenting our local traditional food-based entrepreneurs can encourage the SMEs to adapt and sustain their tradition and culture as part of local heritage and promote soft power marketing toward local and foreign tourists on local traditional food. The limitation of the study is that the informant covered a variance of ethnicities and created a general interpretation of the information covering multicultural ethnicity in Malaysia. As this is a qualitative method, most informants are not necessarily bound to one location as they can be home-based catering businesses or online businesses, which may not require a permanent establishment.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement to researchers who have helped conduct this study and contributed to the article, especially Prof. Madya. Dr Harifah Mohd Noor, Universiti Malaysia Sabah; Prof. Madya. Dr Mazni Saad, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). To co-author Dr Joko Sulistyo, Ciputra University, Surabaya, Indonesia, for checking the article. Not to forget IIUM Students from the Tourism Department and UMS postgraduate students: Rima Abdul Rahman from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities; Putriku Nuraishah Khairani Binti Asby from the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy in helping in moderating and helping with the research. This paper is under University Grant: SDN0045-2019.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

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

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