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## **Exploring the Impact of Malaysia's Culinary Heritage on Tourism and Economic Development**

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### **Abstract**

Local cuisine including culinary heritage, are frequently seen as the foundation of destination/place marketing strategies to forge strong local economies and foster a sense of destination/place. This research investigates the culinary heritage themes, focusing on a multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, to market the country in driving local tourism industry and economic growth. A comprehensive analysis of academic literature triangulated with secondary data was employed in this research. Results indicated that local flavours are often highlighted to promote Malaysia's culinary heritage and identity. Hence, future research could delve deeper into marketing strategies within multi-ethnic, place/destination and culinary heritage tourism industry.

Keywords: culinary heritage; multi-ethnic; tourism; economic; marketing strategy

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Local culinary experiences are crucial in the growth of tourism (Bessière, 1998). Culinary heritage is an essential element of cultural and heritage tourism, as it enhances the understanding of a destination/place's unique identity. The term culinary is often used to describe the distinctive food of a specific destination/place. The culinary heritage acts as a mechanism to draw in tourists and serves as a territorial asset that generates significant social, ecological, and economic advantages. Multiple studies have proved the importance of tourist growth in terms of local and regional development. Numerous tourist destinations and hospitality establishments have acknowledged the significance of local culinary history as a possible catalyst for tourism growth. Consequently, they have initiated efforts to promote and provide their own authentic and traditional local food offerings. As a result, authentic ethnic restaurants gain added value in the tourism industry. Therefore, it is unsurprising to observe that the culinary legacy has been the subject of various investigations in recent years.

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In the case of multi-ethnic Malaysia, diverse culinary heritage has long been recognised as a powerful asset in the country's tourism landscape. These rich culinary experiences have been shaped by a harmonious blend of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European influences, captivating both domestic and international tourists (Jalis 2024). Acknowledging the immense potential of this culinary heritage to drive tourism and foster economic development, the Malaysian government has implemented a comprehensive strategy to strategically promote and integrate local culinary heritage into the country's destination branding efforts (Putri & Baskoro, 2021). Local culinary heritage has been seen as one the crucial to boosting the economy from the tourism industry and leveraging from the other sectors to tourism (Khatimah et al., 2023).

Since 2020 the tourism sector has had a bit declining in gross profit due to COVID-19 and by 2022 the tourism industry slowly growing focusing on the renewed emphasis on domestic tourism as international travel remained constrained (Sharma et al., 2021). The Malaysian government's efforts to elevate the country's culinary heritage as a key component of its tourism strategy can be seen through various initiatives, such as the annual event: "Citrarasa", and the promotion by "gastro diplomacy" (Hussin, 2018). These initiatives aim to showcase the diversity and uniqueness of Malaysian cuisine, positioning the country as a "gastronomy paradise" and enhancing the overall tourist experience (Jalis et al., 2014). By strategically incorporating local culinary traditions into the tourism landscape, Malaysia seeks to not only attract more tourists but also foster a deeper appreciation for its rich local multi-ethnic culture (Azhar et al., 2022) including culinary heritage (Ishak et al., 2023). However, despite these efforts, the integration of local multi-ethnic culinary heritage into the tourism industry to promote the country remains questionable. No research specifically investigates the various themes employed by the tourism stakeholders including the Malaysian government to promote the country. This paper examines the themes utilised and strategized by the tourism stakeholders to market Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary heritage as part of tourism experiences.

### 1.1 The Role of Culinary Heritage and Economic Development Structure

Culinary heritage encompasses a multitude of sociocultural components that have influenced its development and differentiation. Consequently, it encompasses a wide range of agricultural and food products, a variety of dishes, local ingredients, food preparation methods, equipment and appliances for food preparation, and modes of consumption, all of which are available on the tourist market (Bessière, 1998; Jalis, 2016; Khatimah et al., 2023). In this manner, culinary heritage serves as a powerful symbol of regional identity, reflecting the deep cultural roots and unique traditions of a particular locale. The intricacy of this research area is underscored by the multitude of interrelated sociocultural components that have shaped the development and differentiation of local food practices over time, from agricultural and food products to preparation methods and modes of consumption. This rich tapestry of culinary heritage is currently attracting a growing amount of attention from both scholars and policymakers interested in understanding its significance for shaping tourist experiences and destination branding.

Malaysia's diverse culinary heritage has long been recognized as a significant asset in the country's tourism landscape (Ismail et al., 2014). The diverse and harmonious community of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European cultural influences has manifested in a rich blend of flavours and culinary experiences that have profoundly captivated and enthralled both local and international tourists (Roslan, 2021). This unique gastronomic mosaic, reflecting the country's multicultural heritage, has become a defining feature of Malaysia's tourism offering, drawing tourists from around the world to immerse themselves in the diverse flavours and culinary traditions that permeate the nation (Jalis et al, 2014). Acknowledging the immense potential of this culinary legacy to drive tourism and foster economic development, the Malaysian government has implemented a comprehensive strategy to strategically promote and integrate local cuisine into the country's destination branding efforts (Abdullah & Isa, 2020).

By showcasing the diversity and uniqueness of Malaysian cuisine, the government aims to position the country as a "gastronomy paradise" and enhance the overall tourist experience (Roslan, 2021; Ser, 2021). The strategic incorporation of local culinary traditions into the tourism landscape seeks to not only attract more tourists but also foster a deeper appreciation for Malaysia's rich cultural heritage (Hussin, 2018). Table 1 below provides a detailed overview of tourist arrivals and expenditures in the tourism sectors in Malaysia, highlighting their significant contribution to the country's economic income, particularly within the tourism industry. The table presents data on the number of tourist arrivals and the corresponding tourism receipts, demonstrating the crucial role of the tourism sector in generating economic growth and development for the nation.

Table 1. Tourist Arrivals and Receipts to Malaysia

Year	Arrivals (millions)	Receipt (RM) billion
2024	27.3 (projected)	102.7 (projected)
2023	20.14	71.3
2022	10.07	28.23
2021	0.13	0.24
2020	4.33	12.7

(Source: Tourism Malaysia, 2024 from (<https://www.tourism.gov.my/statistics>))

### 1.2 Malaysia's Culinary Heritage and Tourism Industry

Despite the diversity of Malaysia's culinary heritage, the government's efforts to position this as a powerful asset in the country's tourism landscape have faced challenges. While the rich variety of flavours and culinary experiences may captivate domestic and international tourists, a lack of strategic promotion and integration into the country's destination branding has limited its full potential to drive tourism and economic development (Lo et al., 2018). Acknowledging the immense potential of Malaysia's rich culinary heritage to drive tourism and foster economic development, the Malaysian government has implemented a comprehensive strategy to strategically promote and integrate local cuisine into the country's destination branding efforts (Jalis, 2024). This includes initiatives such as the launch of the

"Malaysia Kitchen Program" and the promotion of "gastro diplomacy", which aim to showcase the diversity and uniqueness of Malaysian cuisine and position the country as a "gastronomy paradise" to enhance the overall tourist experience. By strategically incorporating local culinary traditions into the tourism landscape, Malaysia seeks to not only attract more tourists but also foster a deeper appreciation for its rich cultural heritage (Ishak et al., 2023; Jalis et al., 2014).

Scholars have highlighted the significant role of Malaysian cuisine in shaping tourist perceptions and influencing their decision to visit the country (Ishak et al., 2021; Mahachi-Chatibura, 2016). The government's initiatives, such as the launch of the "Malaysia Kitchen Program" and the promotion of "gastro diplomacy," aim to showcase the diversity and uniqueness of Malaysian cuisine, positioning the country as a "gastronomy paradise" an enhancing the overall tourist experience (Jalis et al., 2014). By strategically incorporating local culinary traditions into the tourism landscape, Malaysia seeks to not only attract more tourists but also foster a deeper appreciation for its rich cultural heritage (Sharma et al., 2021). As noted by recent studies, this rich tapestry of culinary heritage is increasingly attracting attention from both scholars and policymakers who are keen to understand its significance in shaping tourist experiences and enhancing destination branding (Ishak et al., 2023; Jalis, 2024; Mohd Sanip et al., 2024)

### 1.3 Promoting Malaysia's Multi-Ethnic Culinary Heritage into the Tourism Industry

The existing challenges in promotional strategies and collaborative initiatives between the Malaysian government and various stakeholders may hinder the seamless integration of the country's rich culinary heritage into the tourism industry (Ishak et al., 2021). Despite the government's efforts to strategically promote and showcase the diversity of Malaysian cuisine through annual programmes like the "Citrarasa" and "gastro diplomacy", more can be done to fully harness the potential of this cultural asset to drive tourism and economic development (Solleh, 2018). The development of economic growth and interrogation of the local cuisine will also aid in safeguarding Malaysian heritage food and promoting it as a world-famous cuisine, thereby creating a major reason for tourists to select Malaysia as a destination (Putri & Baskoro, 2021).

The development of economic growth strategies that prioritise the celebration and interrogation of local cuisine will be crucial in safeguarding Malaysia's heritage food traditions and promoting them as world-renowned culinary experiences. This can be achieved through initiatives that empower and support local food producers, enhance culinary education and training, and foster stronger collaborations between the public and private sectors to develop innovative, immersive culinary tourism offerings (Stone et al., 2021). By addressing the gaps in promotional efforts and strengthening the linkages between the tourism industry and local food systems, Malaysia can position itself as a true "gastronomy paradise" that attracts tourists seeking to deeply engage with the country's rich cultural heritage through its diverse and flavourful cuisine.

Additionally, the development of economic growth and the celebration of local cuisine will also aid in safeguarding Malaysian heritage food and promoting it as a world-famous cuisine, thereby creating a major reason for tourists to choose Malaysia as their travelling destination. The growing interest in local food practices is not merely a trend but reflects a deeper recognition of how these elements contribute to the overall experience of tourists and the economic vitality of regions (Jalis, 2024; Recuero-Virto & Arróspide, 2024). This can be achieved through initiatives that support and empower local food producers, enhance culinary education and training, and foster collaborations between the public and private sectors to develop innovative culinary tourism experiences.

## 2.0 Methodology

A comprehensive assessment of pertinent academic literature and an analysis of secondary data derived from government and industry publications are both included in the study's triangulation of data from a variety of sources. The purpose of this research is to investigate the strategies that tourism stakeholders have deployed and the themes that they have exploited to market Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary heritage as a part of tourism experiences.

The data provides a comprehensive overview of the trends in tourist arrivals, spending patterns, and levels of satisfaction related to Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary heritage experiences. These experiences include promotional tourism brochures, travel guides, and posters that were published by the relevant Malaysian government between the years 2020 and 2024. Specifically, this underlines the what and which themes that arose when marketing Malaysia's local multi-ethnic culinary heritage as a part of the country's tourism experiences. To gain a solid foundation for understanding the existing research on the role of local culinary heritage in tourism development, as well as the branding and marketing of local culinary heritage, the review of academic literature provides a solid foundation. The examination of data from both the government and the industry provides insights into the strategic initiatives and policies that Malaysia has implemented with the intention of capitalizing on the potential of its culinary heritage for the expansion of the tourism sector.

Textual content analysis was performed on the dataset to identify specific themes to market Malaysia's local multi-ethnic culinary heritage. The steps of textual are as follows:

1. Determine the scope of analysis: whether it will be focused on individual words, word meanings, phrases, or entire sentences.
2. Determine the number of concepts to be coded for. Create a predetermined or interactive collection of categories or topics.
3. Determine whether to code for the presence or occurrence rate of a notion.
4. Establish guidelines for encoding the texts.
5. Determine how to handle extraneous information.
6. Encode the text and photos.
7. Evaluate your findings: Formulate conclusions and extrapolate generalizations when applicable.

Table 2 exhibits the total number of tourism and culinary heritage-related brochures, travel guides, and posters published by relevant Malaysian government and tourism stakeholders between 2020 and 2024.

Table 2. Tourism and culinary heritage-related marketing materials published by relevant Malaysian government and tourism stakeholders between 2020 and 2024

Year	Brochures	Travel Guides	Poster
2020	2	2	3
2021	2	2	3
2022	3	3	6
2023	3	3	5
2024 (until June)	2	3	2

(Source: Original for this study)

### 3.0 Findings and Discussion

Table 3 displays Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary heritage themes that emerged based on textual content analysis.

Table 3. Specific themes to market Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary heritage specialities

Themes	Number of Words	Percent (%)
• Flavours	76	30.6
• Local Ingredients	63	25.4
• Eating Manners	42	16.9
• Place/Location	38	15.4
• Year of Restaurant Business	17	6.9
• Person/Family Business	12	4.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>100%</b>

(Source: Original for this study)

A total of 248 words were identified and counted through the textual content analysis of 12 brochures, 13 travel guides, and 19 posters published by relevant Malaysian government and tourism stakeholders from 2020 to June 2024. These marketing materials aimed to promote Malaysia's local multi-ethnic culinary heritage specialities to potential tourists. According to the literature, the Malaysian government's proactive efforts to highlight the country's diverse food culture have been effective in shaping the brand image and attracting more tourists to the destination (Stalmirska, 2021). Additionally, the Malaysian government's proactive efforts to showcase the country's diverse food culture have proven effective in shaping its brand image and attracting more tourists. The initiative not only enhance tourist trust in the authenticity of culinary offerings but also significantly contribute to the overall understanding on tourism experience through culinary related images (Resmi et al., 2023).

The findings of this research indicate that the Malaysian government and tourism stakeholders frequently employed phrases that encapsulated the local multi-ethnic culinary heritage flavours (76 words or 30.6%) to advertise the nation. Marketing materials frequently incorporate terms such as "hot and spicy," "sweet," and "sour." For instance, "...spicy Malay dishes include masak lemak cili api and sambals..." The analysis of secondary data from government and tourism-related stakeholders' publications has also revealed that local ingredients (63 words or 25.4%) are the second theme that is frequently used to discuss the local multi-ethnic culinary heritage. These results were consistent with the findings of Jalis (2016) and Stalmirska (2021) who determined that the two most critical components in describing the quality of local food and cuisine in a specific location are flavour and local ingredients.

It was determined that the Malaysian government, along with other tourism stakeholders, utilized both eating manners (42 words or 16.9%) and place/location (38 words or 15.4%) to promote the country as a distinctive tourism destination by showcasing its local multi-ethnic culinary heritage. This was in addition to the flavours and local ingredients. The marketing materials frequently include phrases such as "using chopsticks and spoon" (which are primarily associated with Chinese culinary traditions) and "using right hand" (which are associated with Malay, Indian, and Indigenous culinary traditions). For instance, "Indians typically use their right hand to eat," and "Chinese individuals typically use chopsticks and a spoon." It is also intriguing to observe that a few local multi-ethnic culinary heritages are being encouraged by associating them with a specific location or region. For example, "the famous masak lemak itik salai in Negeri Sembilan," "delicious nasi kerabu of Negeri Kelantan," and "Penang char kuey teow". As Jalis (2024) explains, all of these components (i.e., co-branding initiative – either specific food brand or place/location) facilitate the education of tourists about the culinary heritage of the destination/place and the explanation of its distinctive food experiences.

Textual content research has revealed that relevant Malaysian tourism stakeholders and the government frequently utilize themes to communicate information about the year of establishment for restaurant businesses (17 words or 6.9%) and the specific individual person/family-owned businesses (12 words or 4.8%). These two themes appear to inform tourists of the original recipes and the family's culinary legacy, which is passed down from one generation to the next. The food company often highlights the years of establishment, such as "since the 1970s" and "original family recipe from 1957", to convey to tourists that the restaurant or food establishment serves traditional Malaysian cuisine that has been passed down through generations in the owners' families. The practice of linking particular cuisines with individual or familial names allows tourists to easily select their preferences while travelling around the country. These findings aligned with Recuero-Virto and Arróspide, (2024) who emphasized that a branding strategy incorporating specific details such as the individual and the year of establishment might serve as an additional means to promote and educate individuals about the local

food heritage.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

In summary, the government of Malaysia and its relevant tourism stakeholders have thoroughly put a thoughtful marketing strategy to market the country as a tourism destination by integrating its local multi-ethnic culinary heritage. This research has found that flavours and ingredients are the most crucial components in not just promoting the tourism industry but to educating tourists about the local multi-ethnic culinary heritage and unique characteristics of Malaysia. This confirmed that these stakeholders have a clear understanding of the concept and uniqueness of local culinary heritage and how they should be communicated in the marketing materials. It is also evidence of preserving Malaysia's rich cultural identity and showcasing its unique gastronomic offerings to the world by recognizing, safeguarding, and championing traditional culinary practices and delicacies. These government-led initiatives, which are particularly beneficial to the thriving tourism sector, contribute to the nation's economic development through collaborative efforts with a variety of stakeholders, including the tourism industry, local communities, and culinary experts. The government's dedication to enhancing Malaysia's food heritage not only reinforces the country's status as a premier gastronomic destination, but also empowers rural communities, preserves traditional knowledge, and cultivates a more profound appreciation for the diversity and authenticity of Malaysian cuisine.

Additionally, it was found that the relevant tourism stakeholders including the Malaysian government attract tourists who are interested in comprehensive cultural experiences through place/location, year of restaurant business, and person/family business. These strategies help to gain tourists' trust in the originality and authenticity of the culinary heritage served to them. Moreover, it provides a deeper understanding of the country's local multi-ethnic culinary heritage by showcasing the diverse and authentic culinary offerings of various regions. Nevertheless, the investigation also reveals several obstacles that impede the seamless integration of culinary heritage into the tourism industry, necessitating their resolution to fully realize the economic potential of this sector. Despite the government's efforts to establish a strong foundation, it is imperative to resolve these challenges to fully realize the economic benefits of Malaysia's culinary tourism. To further enhance Malaysia's status as a premier gastronomic destination and foster sustainable growth in the tourism industry, it will be essential to surmount obstacles such as the absence of collaboration among stakeholders, the necessity of preserving traditional food practices, and the necessity of innovative marketing strategies. Nevertheless, the study may not accurately represent the perspectives of all stakeholders, particularly those in smaller local enterprises. Limited cooperation and the necessity for innovative marketing strategies are among the obstacles. Additionally, the investigation fails to investigate effective solutions or best practices for addressing these issues. Moreover, the tourism industry in Malaysia could really improve by taking a thorough approach to promoting its culinary heritage. Working together with different groups, like government agencies, local businesses, and community organizations, can help us share resources and create effective marketing strategies. Workshops, cooking classes, and cultural exchange programs can really help in keeping traditional food practices alive while also getting both tourists and locals involved. Using creative marketing strategies, like social media campaigns and virtual tours, can help reach a wider audience and highlight Malaysia's diverse food scene. These suggestions can assist in tackling challenges and maximizing the economic potential of the culinary tourism sector.

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#### Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to research on the connections between culinary heritage, tourism, and economic development in Malaysia. The findings provide insights into the Malaysian government's crucial role in promoting the country's diverse food offerings and leveraging them to drive tourism-related economic growth

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