

Cultural Norm and Picky Eating: Food environment and purchases of the B40 in PPR Lembah Subang, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

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Abstract

Addressing child malnutrition in Malaysian B40 communities requires understanding in-home dynamics. This qualitative case study explores how cultural norms and children's picky eating influence food environment and purchases among 29 mothers in PPR Lembah Subang. Bridging a research gap, our findings reveal parents navigate a complex tension: while aspiring to cultural and nutritional ideals, financial constraints and children's refusal of certain foods often compel them to purchase less healthy, yet accepted, items. This illuminates the practical trade-offs families make, offering vital insights for designing culturally sensitive interventions to improve child nutrition in urban poor contexts.

Keywords: stunting; cultural norm; picky eating; food

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1.0 Introduction

Globally in 2020, 149 million children under five were estimated to be stunted (too short for their age), 45 million were estimated to be wasted (too thin for their height), and 38.9 million were overweight or obese (World Health Organization, 2021). Around 45% of deaths among children under five years of age are linked to undernutrition. The rates of childhood overweight and obesity are also rising, mostly in low- and middle-income countries.

In Malaysia, child malnutrition in urban areas among lower-income families is prominent. Such concerns arise due to high costs of living and food, as well as unhealthy dietary practices with imbalanced meals (Ibrahim, 2023). By strata, children from urban areas have a higher prevalence of underweight (15.8%), while children from households with income less than MYR1000 have the highest prevalence of stunting (18%). On the other hand, overweight issues are prevalent among the Bottom 40 (B40) income group (15.4%) and those living in urban areas (15.3%). B40 is defined as a household's monthly income of MYR5,249 and below (Harun, 2023). Malaysia is the only ASEAN country that has yet to reach a satisfactory level of growth standards, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) (Bernama, 2023). Therefore, the backdrop of our study is set against a national increase in malnutrition, as indicated by the Malaysian Public Health Significance index.

1.1 Double burden of malnutrition for children and adolescents.

The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) recorded increasing stunting cases among children under five. The prevalence of stunting increased from 17.7% (2015) to 21.8% (2019). One in five children under the age of five suffers from stunted growth. Underweightness and stunting are prevalent in rural areas and among the B40 income group (Institute for Public Health, 2020). This

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concern extends to older children and adolescents aged 5 to 17 years. Malaysia is facing a double burden of malnutrition: overweight and stunting (Institute for Public Health, 2023, 2024). A summary of the trend is shown in

Table 1.

Table 1. Nutritional Status Trend for Children and Adolescents 5–17 Years of Age in Malaysia

	2011 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2023 (%) (15–17 years old)
Underweight	-	13	15.4	14.7
Stunting	-	13.4	12.7	9.4
Overweight or obesity	6.1	11.9	14.8	16.7

(Source:.) Institute for Public Health (2015, 2020, 2023, 2024)

While existing studies have highlighted the issue of malnutrition, this article aims to shed light on the socio-cultural nuances facing urban low-income families in PPR Lembah Subang and how they influence their household food purchasing decisions. This article is among the first to explore child malnutrition from the perspectives of consumer behavior and local cultural environment, particularly in relation to food choices.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Overview of malnutrition studies in Malaysia

UNICEF Malaysia and DM Analytics (2018) conducted face-to-face interviews with 966 heads of households and 2,142 children from 17 different low-cost flats, also known as the People's Housing Project (PPR) in Kuala Lumpur, to investigate urban child poverty and deprivation. Findings showed that the prevalence of underweight, stunting, and wasting in these households is two times higher compared to the KL average. The prevalence of overweight, however, is almost six times higher (23%) compared to the KL average (4%). The study also found that more than one in 10 of the children have less than three meals a day, and 97% of the participants said that high food prices prevent them from preparing healthy meals for their children. Specifically, one in two people has not had enough money to buy food in recent months. This highlights the need to investigate the food choices and experiences of Malaysian urban poor in low-cost flats in other areas of the Klang Valley, Malaysia (UNICEF Malaysia & DM Analytics, 2018).

Financial pressure is identified as a significant factor in limited access to healthy food choices (Singh, 2022; Talib et al., 2021; UNICEF Malaysia & DM Analytics, 2018). Ironically, Majid et al. (2024) found that parents have a good level of awareness of stunting factors among preschool children. Despite a relatively strong foundational understanding of finances and awareness, there is still a lack of understanding of household food purchasing behavior, which may help explain the increasing trend of malnutrition in Malaysia.

2.2 Overview of cultural nuances in Malaysia

Malaysia's unique blend of ethnic composition - Malay, Chinese, Indian, and various indigenous communities – creates a vibrant cultural environment that has profoundly influenced their daily life, including the everyday choices of food. Within this multicultural landscape, food holds a central place, particularly during social gatherings like Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, and Deepavali. Meals are often communal, reflecting strong familial bonds and a spirit of sharing.

Traditional Malay cuisine, for instance, often features rice as a primary staple, complemented by rich curries, stir-fries, and dishes such as "*singgang*" (a clear, sour soup) and various types of "*gulai*" (curries made with coconut milk) (Hamzah & Rahman, 2021). The cultural significance of specific dishes, such as *chapati*, within the Indian Muslim community also highlights the diverse culinary heritage that shapes daily diets. While these cultural tenets are widely shared, their practical application within urban poor communities, such as PPR Lembah Subang, can be significantly influenced by economic realities and accessibility to traditional ingredients and diverse food sources.

3.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional qualitative case study was conducted at PPR Lembah Subang, Taman Putra Damai, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia. Five focus group discussions (FGD) were held over three sessions involving parents and guardians who are residents of the complex. Two concurrent FGDs were conducted in the first two sessions. The remaining FGD was held in the final session.

3.1 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed with the following criteria;

1. Malaysian.
2. Resides in PPR Lembah Subang, Taman Putra Damai.
3. Aged between 25 and 60 years old.
4. Monthly household income of MYR5,249 and below.
5. Has a child or dependent child under 18 years of age.
6. Makes decisions or involves in purchasing food or groceries.

7. One representative for each family.

3.2 Data Collection Technique

Potential participants were recruited by sending WhatsApp text messages, and they were provided with an online link to complete their registration. Participants were given the liberty to choose any of the three sessions, i.e., 24 March 2024, 28 April 2024, or 19 May. Each FGD included between six and eight participants, aligning with the recommendation by Fusch and Ness (2015). A total of 29 participants took part in the data collection activity. Each participant was given a Lotus's shopping voucher worth MYR50.

The FGDs were conducted at a residential hall. Tables and chairs were arranged in a roundtable format to encourage group conversation. Researchers also prepared some props, consisting of milk cartons, fresh fruits, and vegetables, to stimulate their thoughts about their grocery and food purchases. Each FGD lasted for about an hour. All conversations were recorded using an audio recorder.

While there is debate and a lack of clarity over the meaning of saturation (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024), the decision to limit the focus groups to only five was made based on the following justifications. First, the purposive sampling had already targeted a specific group, which in this case was the residents of PPR Lembah Subang. This could lead to the emergence of key themes based on their shared experience in the same community (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

The relatively small number of participants in each FGD may enable a deeper, richer, and more contextual understanding of a phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In this case, participants are more likely to feel comfortable sharing about food purchases within their context as low-income families, given the relatively small group size. Contextual understanding is a crucial element and can therefore contribute to achieving information saturation (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). The decision to conduct five FGDs is deemed sufficient for the emergence of key themes in cultural norms and children's food preferences.

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

Interview sessions were conducted and transcribed in "*Bahasa Melayu*" (Malay) verbatim. This is to ensure that the transcripts do not get lost in translation. Each transcript was labeled according to its respective FGD group. A transcriber was hired to produce the transcripts. Data were analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti software version 25.

3.4 Ethical consideration

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Business, Economics, and Accounting (ERBFBEA) at HELP University. During data collection, participants were given a copy of the interview protocols before conducting the FGD. The interview protocol included a list of interview questions, as well as a consent form that described the participants' voluntary participation and permission to have their discussion audio recorded. Participants were briefed before the FGD and required to sign the interview protocol documents.

4.0 Findings

4.1 The cultural tapestry of food practices

Findings from this study unveil the strong influence of cultural upbringing on the community's food choices. Despite residing in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, participants' racial and geographical background affect their meal selections and cooking methods. As parents, their preferences would shape the household food scenario. For example, several participants from Kelantan and Sabah fancy soups as their primary choice of meal. One participant with a spouse from the "Mamak" community, i.e., Indian Muslim, always has flatbread or "chapati" as their go-to meal.

*"Chapati. Because I married a Mamak. So (we) really love eating chapati."
(P5 in 02 Group 2 @ 24 March)*

"My child loves to eat soup. Because my husband is from Sabah, and people from Sabah feel like they'll choke if there's no soup. [Laughed]" (P6 in 02 Group 2 @ 24 March)

Like two Kelantanese participants in another FGD, they too prefer soups and dislike foods cooked in coconut milk or "*santan*". As shown below;

"P6: Because I like dishes like 'singgang' (a type of sour soup) and soups, things like that. I'm not particularly fond of curries; I don't eat them often. I'm not particularly fond of coconut milk dishes. I prefer soup more."

Interviewer: Soup, huh? How about you, ma'am?

P3: For P3, if I cook at home, I always prefer boiled dishes, and my child likes them too. If it's squid, it's 'sotong singgang' (squid in sour soup), boiled squid, 'ikan singgang' (fish in sour soup). Things like that. If it's beef, it's also 'daging singgang' (beef in sour soup). 'Daging singgang' with grilled fish..." (P6 and P3 in 05 Single Group @ 19 May)

Festive seasons, such as Eidul Fitri or "Hari Raya" and Ramadan, do affect the families' food dynamics, indicating changes in their meal choices. Parents are more relaxed about their children's food choices on Eidul Fitri, considering it is a celebratory event and that children are often tempted by the food served to them.

"P3: I'm P3. However, during Hari Raya, I honestly don't mind what my kids want to eat, as it's Hari Raya. It's their day to choose. We can't really restrict them, can we? It's their choice... They've already fasted for a month, right? Since they fasted. So on Hari Raya, it's up to them.

P7: Because during fasting, there's already so much that's been — things that have been abstained from. So on the first day of Hari Raya, we just eat... No need to abstain, no... When we visit people's houses for Hari Raya, right? We can't stop them, can we? [unclear] Carbonated drinks, cake. Things we can't control." (P3 and P7 in 03 Group 1 @ 28 April)

4.2 Picky eating: A challenge within nutritional ideals

This section proceeds to illustrate their children's food preferences. Many parents stated that their children enjoy eating various vegetables, particularly broccoli, water spinach (also known as "*kangkung*"), carrots, and cauliflower. Fruits are also generally well-received, with children enjoying a variety of options like bananas, apples, watermelons, and mangoes but often challenged by their families' economics constraints.

"The price of fruit can also be quite something now. For my children, they eat a variety of fruits. It's just that I have to be good at budgeting. Because if I buy fruit, they finish it all at that very moment. There's no saving any, in no time! [giggled] Any kind of fruit. Especially bananas. Oh my God, it's in the plastic bag and when you look there's only a few left... we don't even get a chance to look again, and it's already gone." (P1 in 01 Group 01 @ 24 March)

As for meal types, the common meal preferences include chicken dishes, particularly chicken soup, though some children may not enjoy eating chicken as much. Fish was also mentioned, with some kids preferring steamed fish over fried ones. Eggs are the most popular protein source due to their ease of cooking.

P7: The kids, omelettes. They don't really eat boiled eggs. They don't want to eat boiled eggs. They eat boiled eggs with soy sauce." (P2 and P7 in 03 Group 01 @ 28 April)

The FDG also unravelled parental struggles in getting their children to consume vegetables. Several parents shared their experiences, noting that their children prefer certain vegetables, such as broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower, but are reluctant to eat leafy greens. Many parent expressed frustration about their children's overall aversion to vegetables, while some shared the difficulty in incorporating vegetables into meals, as even small amounts are often rejected.

"[For] the children, vegetables are difficult. They don't want to eat them, even a little bit. They even pick out the onions. It's difficult." (P5 in 04 Group 02 @ 28 April)

In situations like this, participants described their children as "picky eaters". They then expressed concern about their children's nutrition and growth, highlighting the struggles many parents face in encouraging healthy eating habits among their kids. Overall, this section highlights the favourite and disliked foods among the children in their household. It also highlights parents' awareness on the importance of vegetables and fruits in children's diets and the varying preferences among siblings.

4.3 Picky eating and economic realities

While parents often hold intentions for healthier eating and budget-conscious shopping, these are frequently navigated in response to their children's requests. This study found that children's preferences influenced grocery shopping habits in two ways. First, parents actively avoid buying ingredients that their children typically refuse to eat to minimise food waste.

"For me, P6, I will buy what my children eat. So, I don't have to waste [food]. I only buy what they eat." (P6 in 02 Group 02 @ 24 March)

This quote illustrates a conscious decision by a parent to align grocery purchases with their children's preferences. This highlights how children's dislikes directly shape the items included in the shopping cart thus potentially discarding the need to instil healthier food choices.

The second aspect relates to making purchases in small quantities to accommodate varied preferences. In families with multiple children who have different food preferences, parents opt for buying small amounts of various ingredients to cater to each child's tastes. This approach aimed to ensure that each child had something they eat.

"So, I buy a little bit of everything... Fish is also expensive actually. So, I buy a little bit..." (P7 in 02 Group 2 @ 24 March)

To ensure both children (and the husband) had palatable options, P7 resorts to buying small quantities of different protein sources. This directly influences the items and quantities purchased during grocery shopping, even amidst concerns about food costs. The findings suggest that children's behaviour of "picky eating" plays a tangible role in shaping food-related decision-making within these B40 households, despite their parental intention for healthy choices and preferences for certain types of food.

5.0 Discussion

The findings reveal a complex interplay where established cultural food norms, such as the preference for “*singgang*” or the indulgence during Eid, set the backdrop for family meal practices. However, the pervasive challenge of picky eating among children often forces parents to deviate from these cultural ideals, creating a tension in daily food preparation. This internal household conflict is then significantly exacerbated by the economic constraints faced by the B40 urban poor.

5.1 The tension between nutritional ideals and economic realities

In comparison with existing Malaysian studies, Talib et al. (2021) conducted a preliminary quantitative study among urban poor residents living in PPR flats in Kuala Lumpur. They found that low monthly household income may have constrained residents' spending on fruits and vegetables to meet the requirements of the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines (MDG). Nevertheless, the study lacks a detailed description of how and why it affects consumers' choices of fruit and vegetable purchases.

Hence, the present study extends the discussion from Talib et al. (2021) that while mothers understand the importance of balanced meals and desire to provide culturally rich food, their limited budgets and the need to prevent food waste mean they frequently prioritise purchasing foods their picky children will consume, even if those choices are less nutritious or culturally 'ideal'. This highlights how the financial realities of urban poverty compel families to make difficult trade-offs that directly impact the nutritional landscape within the home, demonstrating how cultural aspirations, individual preferences, and economic limitations converge at the point of food purchase and consumption.

5.2 The complex interplay between culture, economic realities, and choices of food.

In Segamat, Johor, Partap et al. (2019) conducted a study on the prevalence and determinants of stunting in children aged five and above. They found that household drinking water sources and sanitation facilities contribute to a decrease in stunting rates. The authors also acknowledged their limitation in exploring ethnicity-specific factors, such as diet, to explain stunting among the children. They then suggested that a qualitative approach be explored as a research avenue for future studies. Therefore, this study extends the discussion from Partap et al. (2019) by highlighting the role of ethnicity and culture in the community's food choices. Parents would typically opt for menus they are familiar with, such as “*singgang*” and “*chapati*”, which, as it happens, are healthier choices for the children's overall health. This highlights the dynamic interplay between cultural norm and food choices at home.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study sheds light on the complex relationship between cultural norms, children's picky eating, and the resulting food environment and purchasing decisions among B40 families in PPR Lembah Subang. While families hold strong cultural ideals about food, these are constantly negotiated against the realities of children's selective eating habits and severe economic constraints. Parents often make trade-offs, sometimes prioritising children's immediate preferences and avoiding food waste due to the pressures of their limited budget. This highlights how socio-cultural factors profoundly shape the food landscape and consumption patterns within these vulnerable households.

This study is limited by the lack of male participants, thus restricting their perspectives in the discussion regarding household food practices and purchases. Additionally, its cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot of the lived experiences of the urban poor community, limiting the understanding of how these dynamics evolve.

Future research should consider incorporating male caregivers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of household food decision-making and the challenges it presents. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for tracking changes in food practices, picky eating behaviours, and purchasing patterns over time. Finally, exploring the role of local food retailers and community programs could provide valuable insights into navigating child malnutrition in Petaling Jaya.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The outcome of this study is hoped to assist policymakers in designing effective corrective measures in educating the public on children's and family nutrition. Marketers could also benefit from this study through the detailed narratives of the urban poor's food cultural norms, which in turn may assist them in developing the right product that suits the needs of the local community.

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