

## ARTICLE

## Perception of Endorsement and Certification on Food Heritage in Food Identity Attributes in Klang Valley Area

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This paper empirically examined the public perception of food identity attributes. As many countries including Malaysia are reporting on experiencing the external pressures of their culture and tradition, including the losing their food identity a study needs to be done to find the public perception of food identity. A causal research design using a quantitative approach was applied using Klang Valley as data collection setting. Around 898 respondents comprised of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others ethnic were attained. The collected data are then analysed using frequency and mean value. It is revealed that food identity attributes comprised of image, authenticity and sustainability, on the whole, and showed a positive perception with respondents on each attribute. Demonstrating the importance of having these attributes to represent food identity in public perspective.

### Introduction

The culture and identity of a nation are shaped by the background of the people, their languages, and beliefs. Without these factors, a nation cannot learn how to shape itself and to establish its identity. When a nation is very sure of its culture and identity, it tends to have a clear focus on what it wants in a positive manner (Ratnasingam, 2010). Parallel with this nation, Malaysia is experiencing the urgency in having its food identity as it sharing food cultural background with neighbouring countries. Countries like Singapore and Indonesia, which are sharing common historical roots and cultural heritage could create tension and dispute especially on the common cuisines or traditional food especially when each country pursues to validate those cuisines or traditional foods as their identity. According to Chong (2009), each country is becoming more aggressive in defence and protect such heritage as theirs to safeguard the country and country identity. These incidences showed it is importance to at least having our own cultures identity like oral tradition, languages, festive events, rites and beliefs, music and songs, the performing arts, traditional medicine, literature, traditional sports and games as well as traditional cuisine identity (Lim, 2012), although sharing the fundamental basis of it cannot be avoidable. With that, this paper is assessing the public perception of the food identity attributes relating to image, authenticity and sustainability.

### Food and Identity

Food holds the key to any culture and people make many assumptions about other people's diets based on whom they claim to be, and people also make assumptions about whom people are, based on what they eat (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2012). Mintz (1996) noted that consumption is always conditioned by the foods we eat and the manner in which we preserve, prepare, and serve it and all have meanings at some levels. Consumption or eating in all cultures is expressive of both beliefs-systems and social distinctions that exist within groups and society. The food that we eat is closely linked to cultural codes, and it is precisely this which enables food to become a good indicator of identity (Crouch & O'Neill, 2000). Foods especially traditional dishes became assets for identity formation that allow the community to hold on to its local knowledge (Gvion, 2006). In related to food identity, several studies relate image (Backe, 2013; Dupree, 2002; Everett, 2016; Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Hui-Tun, 2009; Sunanta, 2005; Tibere & Aloysius, 2013); authenticity (DeSoucey, 2010; Hamzah, Ab Karim, Othman, & Hamzah, 2013; Timothy, 2016) and sustainability (Guerrero et al., 2009; Palladino, 2010; Ratnasingam, 2010; Yurtseven, 2011) as attributes that help the formation of a national identity, as it is essential to recognized nationalism and national identity.

### Attributes of Food Identity

Based on the previous literature three attributes can be associated with the food identity. They are image, authenticity and sustainability. Further exploration of

these attributes will be further explained in the next section.

#### **i. Image**

In a marketing context, the image is often linked to consumer behaviour and the literature abounds with attempts to clarify the image formation process, the factors that underlie it and its components (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002). Previous studies found that by promoting iconic food and drink, can help create an “image” for a particular destination that will contribute to attracting new visitors and boost its economic sustainability in the long term. It also an effective means of creating an image that tourist can link or identified during their visits to particular the “traditional” landscapes and farming methods (Sims, 2009; Timothy, 2016). For example, the popularity of Thai food and drink promote as a tourist destination in the global level have its “national image” (Lertputtarak, 2012; Sunanta, 2005). Also, tourists perceive Thai food in terms of unique serving style, delicious, nourishing food, and exotic cooking methods (Lertputtarak, 2012). In other words, food image does link with identity the particular region or state especially in tourist perspectives.

#### **ii. Authenticity**

Authenticity is a quality attributed to a range of foods and cuisines. Authenticity consists of two main themes. First, it is associated with that food of specific the specific location. Second, food products are the result of a craft process. These two themes are typically found together and both rest on an appeal to the tradition in which food is the product of a continuous and collective effort, it pre-dates industrialised food systems, and its value derives from the opposition. These relate to the places, peoples, knowledge, and food that build into the full-blown concept that bounded the local culture (Vargas-Hernández, 2012). This showed that how authenticity linked with identity as it bound to a specific culture one ethnic, region or states. This also been confirmed by Danhi, Weinstein, and Yan (2008) authentic cuisine are usually steeped in history, respectful of traditions as well as incorporating innovations while still retaining the essential features such as sight (colours, presentations and knife cuts.), smell (the aromas), taste (balance or equation of sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami) and touch (textural attributes such as fat, doneness). On a more specific level, local and authentic food especially the sustainable gastronomy is about producing food that is environmentally sensitive to the particular place (Yurtseven, 2011).

#### **iii. Sustainability**

Sustainability does not only refer to the shelf life of a product but also to the environmental requirements needed for tourism. In the case of cultural tourism, conservation and the struggle for heritage management often become important issues (Palladino, 2010). The importance of sustainability in the heritage tourism is

reflected by ensuring the authenticity of the product and experience; the provision of a learning environment through interaction and involvement; conserving and protecting resources; and building partnerships between visitors, managers, and stakeholders (Tîrca, Stanculescu, & Chis, 2009). As this is important to preserve the identity of the product and the place which is easily eroded.

In terms of food, Guerrero et al. (2009) constitute that sustainability of traditional food is an important element for European culture, identity, and heritage which contributes to the development and sustainability of rural areas, protecting them from depopulation, entailing substantial product differentiation potential for producers and processors and providing ample variety in food choice for consumers.

## **Materials and Methods**

A causal research design using a quantitative approach through a cross-sectional study was applied with a self-reported and self-administered survey questionnaire. This method is to assess public perception of food identity attributes such as image, authenticity and sustainability which contribute to food identity.

### **Sampling and Population**

The target population is among the Malaysian public which consists of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other ethnic groups. Salkind (2003) stated that studying a sample rather than an entire population also leads to more reliable results, mainly because of it able of reducing fatigue and fewer errors in data collection. However, due to high number of sample of the population those Malaysians residing in the Klang Valley, which comprises of the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, the Petaling district in Selangor (Shah Alam, Petaling Jaya and Subang Jaya), Gombak, Klang and Hulu Langat and their suburbs and adjoining cities and towns are selected.

### **Research Instrument**

The survey instrument is consisting five major sections with Section A solicit the information about respondent demographic information. Section B is dealing with food heritage determinants while Section C is designed to measure the food identity formation with three subsections. Most items in the dimensions were replicated from the previous related studies with a few minor modifications of wording made to address specific needs of the study (Guerrero et al., 2009; Horng & Tsai, 2010; Lertputtarak, 2012; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; Rand, Heath, & Alberts, 2003; Robinson & Clifford, 2012; Vanhonacker, Lengard, Hersleth, & Verbeke, 2010; Yurtseven, 2011). Respondents were required to translate their view on a five type Likert scale ranging from 1 with “strongly disagree” to 5 “strongly agree”.

## Data collection process

On data collection, the questionnaire survey was conveniently administered by the researchers at the stipulated areas. The ethnic respondents were initially approached, and those met with the age set by the researcher were invited to take part in the study. With the full cooperation and commitment given by most of the ethnic respondents, a total 898 respondents were successfully distributed within 30 days of the survey period. The collected data were analysed using SPSS software (Norušis, 1991). Descriptive analysis was used in addressing the objective of the study by using frequency and mean value.

## Results and Discussions

### Respondent profile

The 898 respondents' socio-demographic profiles which included gender, age, ethnicity, profession and educational level. Female respondents at 59.4 percent (n=533) outnumbered the male respondents with 40.6 percent (n=365). More than half of the respondents aged were between 30 to 35 years old at 62.4 percent (n=560) compared to another age group, that is 36-40 years old at 18 percent (n=162), 41- 45 year old at 6 percent (n=54), 46- 50 year old at 6.6 percent (= 59), lastly 51 year old and above at 7 percent (n=63). More than three-quarter of the respondents were Malays at 78.1 percent (n=701) compared to Chinese, Indian and other at 21.9 percent (n=197) which comprised of Bumiputera Sabah and Sarawak.

In terms of professions, the highest proportion of respondents is from private sector with 41.5 percent (n=373) compared to government sector at 33 percent (n=296), entrepreneur at 9.7 percent (n=87), students at 9.6 percent (n=86) and others at 6.2 percent (n=56) which comprised of pensionaries and housewife. With regard to the educational level, the highest proportion of the respondents had obtained the diploma at 40.3 percent (n=362), followed degree at 24.9 percent (n=224), SPM at 14.4 percent (n=129), master at 12.9 percent (n=116), doctoral degree at 3.5 percent (n=31) and the small proportion is among the SRP/ UPSR at 3.9 percent (n=36).

### Public perception of Food Identity (FI) attribute: Image

The descriptive statistic looking at the percentages and mean score was used in examining overall perception on the food identity through attributes such as Image, Authenticity, and Sustainability (see Table 1, 2 and 3).

Table 1 showed the magnitude of the means scores ranges 4.06 to 4.11 indicates respondents agreed with most of the items under the image attributes. As such, they agree that endorsement of food heritage is

associated with food icon that represent the identity of each state in Malaysia (M = 4.11, CIM3).

**Table 1.** Reported Mean Score for Attribute: Image

Items	Code	Mean	S.D
Image			
Endorsement of food heritage in the long term would develop an image of Malaysian food identity	CIM1	4.10	0.674
Endorsement of food heritage will directly increase the image of Malaysian identity	CIM2	4.06	0.675
Endorsement of food heritage associated with food icon that represents the identity of each state in Malaysia	CIM3	4.11	0.660
Endorsement of food heritage portray a range of multicultural ethnic, reflecting Malaysian food identity	CIM4	4.09	0.673
Endorsement of food heritage reflects the image of a society in a particular state in Malaysia	CIM5	4.06	0.669
Endorsement of food heritage will depict the uniqueness of ethnicity culinary that reflect Malaysian food identity	CIM6	4.06	0.663

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree, 6= Not answer; n=898.

They also agreed that in the long term endorsement of food heritage would become an image represent Malaysia food identity (M = 4.10, CIM1). Likewise, food heritage portrays a range of multicultural ethnic reflecting Malaysian food identity (M = 4.09, CIM4). On the other hand, a slightly lower means score appeared on three items with the same mean score (M = 4.06, CIM2, CIM5, CIM6). Respondents agreed that the endorsement would directly increase the image of Malaysian identity; it also reflects the image of society in a particular state in Malaysia, and it depicts the uniqueness of ethnicity culinary.

This showed the perception by respondents agreeing by endorsing food heritage, it would contribute building image which in long-term would develop into food identity, as food heritage portrays the multicultural ethnic reside in the country. They also agreed on the uniqueness of ethnicity culinary reflects the image of society in a particular state or region and it will directly increase the image of country food identity. This is supported by Turgeon-Gouin (2011) statement saying food is one of the most powerful symbols of community and even nation. As indicate by Harrington and Ottenbacher (2010) it is a social marker where it creates a symbol projecting an image or reinforcing a self-image of a community or place. One of the ways to enhance regional image is by building it based on the clear identity of the traditional foods and wines from that particular region.

### Public perception of Food Identity (FI) attribute: Authenticity

In Table 2, five items were used in measuring respondent perception on authenticity attribute. Results revealed that majority of the respondents agreed on the overall perception with means score ranges from 4.04 to 4.10 indicates respondents agreed with most of the items.

Table 2. Reported Mean Scores for Attribute: Authenticity

Items	Code	Mean	S.D
Authenticity			
Using authenticity attributes for endorsement of food heritage as a benchmark for Malaysian food identity	CAT1	4.10	0.656
Endorsement of food heritage preserve the authenticity of taste and flavour that signify Malaysian food identity	CAT2	4.07	0.669
Endorsement preserve the traditional characteristics of food heritage that symbolises Malaysian food identity	CAT3	4.05	0.657
Endorsement of food heritage using authentic method and techniques indicate Malaysian food identity	CAT4	4.04	0.682
Endorsement of food heritage is based on the authentic ethnic food culture that reflects Malaysian identity	CAT5	4.09	0.639

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree, 6= Not answer; n=898.

From looking at the Table 2 they agreed on the statement using authenticity attributes for endorsement of food heritage as a benchmark for country food identity (M= 4.10, SD= 0.656, AT1). In line with this, respondent also agreed that certification and endorsement of food heritage preserve the authenticity of taste and flavor (M = 4.07, SD = 0.669, AT2), preserve the traditional characteristics of food heritage (M= 4.05, SD= 0.657, AT3), using authentic method and techniques signify and symbolizes country food identity. Lastly, respondents also believed that certification and endorsement of food heritage based on the authentic of ethnic's food culture reflect the country food identity. From this analysis, authenticity of food heritage through attributes such as taste, flavour, characteristics of the food and method could be used as a benchmark when endorsing and certified food heritage as country food identity.

These outcomes displayed the respondent's perception on authenticity as one of the attributes contributes to food identity. Authenticity, in short, is the quality attributed to the range of food and cuisine (Vargas-Hernandez, 2012; Yurtseven 2011). In producing authentic food and cuisine, it must comprise of history, traditions and originality. Plus retaining the necessary features such as sight, smell, taste and the touch of the origin food as well as creating food from that are sustainable (Danhi et al., 2008). Furthermore the authenticity especially in cuisine while

incorporating innovations it's still retaining the essential features such as sight (colours, presentations and knife cuts.), smell (the aromas), taste (balance or equation of sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami) and touch (textural attributes such as fat, doneness). It implies true, original, genuine, actual and unchanged versions of heritage. It implies continuity in its purest form (Chhabra et al., 2013). Therefore, authenticity is an essential element in portraying the family identity, culture and heritage of community in one nation (Hamzah et al., 2013).

### Public perception of Food Identity (FI) attribute: Sustainability

Result of the descriptive is showing that respondents agreed with all the five-item used. This is evident through the magnitude of the mean scores ranging from 4.05 to 4.10 as shown in Table 3. One of elements that catalyst food identity is through sustainability and this section analysis is looking at the respondent's view. The result of the descriptive is showing that respondents agreed with all the five-item used.

Table 3. Reported Mean Score for the Attribute: Sustainability

Items	Code	Mean	S.D
Sustainability			
Endorsement of food heritage help to preserve food heritage and recreate the unique food identity of the states in Malaysia	CST1	4.10	0.650
Endorsement of food heritage through documentation ensure the preservation of Malaysian food identity	CST2	4.10	0.644
Endorsement of food heritage through documentation ensure the sustainability of Malaysian food identity	CST3	4.09	0.647
Endorsement of food heritage can create awareness of Malaysian food identity	CST4	4.06	0.656
The active role played by the government through endorsement preserves and sustains Malaysian food identity	CST5	4.05	0.659

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Not Sure, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree, 6= Not answer; n=898.

This is evident through the magnitude of the mean scores ranging from 4.05 to 4.10. In this sense, certification and endorsement of food heritage help to preserve food heritage and create the unique food identity (M= 4.10, SD= 0.650, ST1). Certification and endorsement of food heritage through documentation ensure the preservation (M = 4.10, SD = 0.644, ST2) and sustainability (M= 4.09, SD = 0.647, ST3) of country food identity. They also agreed that certification and endorsement of food heritage could create awareness of country food identity (M = 4.06, SD = 0.656, ST4) thus believed that the active role played by the government through certification and endorsement preserves and sustains Malaysian food

identity ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 0.659$ ,  $ST5$ ). What could be contended here through sustainability attributes certification and endorsement on food heritage would create the awareness and the need of documentation in preserving the food heritage which at the end would form the country food identity.

The result showed most respondents agreed on the perceptions endorsement on food heritages through sustainability attributes would contribute toward food identity. Reinforced by Atikahambar, Zainal, Nizan, Nor'Aini, and Zain (2014) stated that the local food holds much potential to enhance sustainability in tourism, contribute to the authenticity of the destination, strengthen the local economy and provide for the environmentally friendly infrastructure. Furthermore, sustainability through promotion of iconic local food and drink products can also help to create an "image" for a particular destination that will help it attract new visitors and boost its economic in the long term (Ilbery, Morris, Buller, Maye, & Kneafsey, 2005). Hence, sustaining country traditional snack and presenting it to a higher level in terms of its image, the food will remain a local favourite for years to come and be enjoyed by the future generations (Omar, Rashid, & Karim, 2008). Therefore, sustainability preserved the environmental, promote economic and socio-cultural especially on food heritage.

## Conclusions

This study revealed finding of public perception in image, authenticity, and sustainability as food identity attributes. All items in each attribute showed majority of them agreed that the attributes play an important role in representing nation food identity. This is strengthened by the statement on the preservation (CST1), the authenticity of traditional food as part of food heritage and a benchmark for Malaysia food identity (CAT1). Food heritage representational image of the country, thus associate food heritage itself as food identity (CIM1, CIM3). The study requires further confirmation through replication of the study in the broader scope. This paper undoubtedly contributes to the current literature on the public perception of food identity attributes. On the practical perspective, these attributes can be used as a measurement tool for responsible agencies in addition to what they are currently using in developing and recognizing the national food heritage. Finally, recognizing and preserving our food heritage not only benefit the present society and the nation but the future generation and the country as a whole.

## Conflict of Interest

All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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