

Traditional Food Choices of Malaysian University Students: Social Influence, Preferences and Health

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Aiza Nur Syahmina Zainudin

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management,
UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia
aizasyahmina17@gmail.com

Hanis Nazirah Jamaludin

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management,
UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia
hanisnazirah07@gmail.com

Siti Nurhanifah Sulong*

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management,
UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia
nurhanifah@uitm.edu.my

Nur Amanina Idris

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management,
UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia
amaninaidris@uitm.edu.my

Muhamad Shah Kamal Ideris

School of Tourism, Hospitality and Environmental Management,
University Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia
shahkamal83@gmail.com

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Abstract

Traditional food selection among university students is increasingly influenced by modern lifestyles and global food trends, raising concerns about the diminishing role of traditional cuisine in the lives of younger generations. The present study investigates the factors and relationship between social influence, food preferences and health factor among Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) students. An online survey administered among students generated 356 valid responses. The analyses consisted of descriptive analysis and Regression analysis. The findings highlight that food preferences and

health considerations are the main reasons students choose traditional food, while social influence plays a lesser role. In addition, these results reflect the shifting food culture among younger generations, where enjoyment and health perception are becoming central to food choices. This study also contributes to the literature by showing that health and taste outweigh cultural pressures in shaping student traditional food choices.

Keywords:

Traditional food, social influence, food preference, health consideration, university student

1 Introduction

In Malaysia, traditional food serves as a bridge between generations and a living testament to the nation's cultural heritage. It is more than mere sustenance because it embodies the history, values, and identity of diverse communities, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous ethnic groups (Jalis et al., 2024). This can be seen from iconic dishes such as *nasi lemak*, *laksa*, and *rendang*, which exemplify this cultural fusion, incorporating distinct local ingredients like turmeric, lemongrass, and galangal that preserve authentic flavors across generations (SEO Borong, 2025). These culinary traditions, passed down over time, are cultural assets that encapsulate the customs and stories of the past (Zrnic et al., 2021). Preserving traditional food is therefore vital, not only for sustaining cultural continuity and national identity but also for enhancing culinary tourism, particularly among Muslim travelers seeking halal and heritage-rich food experiences. However, in today's fast-paced and globalized society, the bond between younger Malaysians and traditional food is at increasing risk of fading.

Globalization, modernity, and the influence of Western food culture have increasingly shaped the dietary preferences of Malaysia's younger generations, particularly university students. The expansion of fast-food franchises and the widespread availability of ready-to-eat (RTE) meals have transformed the culinary landscape, making convenient and quick food options more appealing and accessible than traditional cuisine (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020). This alteration is further reinforced by urbanization and changing lifestyles that prioritize convenience and efficiency over the time-consuming and labor-intensive preparation of traditional dishes (Basurra et al., 2021). As a result, many students have stopped preparing and consuming traditional food, raising concerns about the potential loss of Malaysia's unique culinary heritage and cultural knowledge (Rahmat et al., 2021). Furthermore, students' food preferences have shifted to emphasize convenience, visual appeal, and modern flavors, often at the expense of tradition and nutritional value (Rahmat et al., 2021). Besides that, traditional food is frequently perceived as outdated and impractical, further reducing its relevance among younger consumers.

In recent years, the changing eating patterns of young adults have also contributed significantly to the decline of traditional food consumption. University students are increasingly drawn to modern, efficient, and globally inspired food options that align with active lifestyles and contemporary tastes, often substituting cultural culinary traditions (Ahmad et al., 2024). Traditional dishes are often regarded as time-intensive

and visually less appealing compared to trendy or fashionable foods, diminishing their popularity among young consumers. Consequently, RTE foods that are easy to obtain and socially shareable online dominate youth eating habits. The lack of cultural culinary skills further disadvantages younger generations, leaving them with limited knowledge of the nutritional, historical, and cultural contexts of traditional dishes (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). This erosion of culinary heritage also has implications for the food industry. Without proper interventions, fewer people will choose traditional food and preferences between the young generation, such as university student, will slowly decline. University students play a pivotal role in this cultural transformation, as their eating habits both mirror and shape broader societal changes. Their dietary choices are influenced by a complex interplay of social influences, cultural identity, accessibility, and health considerations. Modern youth often prioritize peer acceptance, international food trends, and convenience, resulting in reduced traditional food consumption. This contrasts with Malaysia’s collectivist traditions, where family and social norms have historically reinforced traditional eating practices (Rahmat et al., 2021). Even when students express intentions to consume traditional foods, their actual decisions are often shaped by convenience and availability.

In response to these concerns, this study needs to be conducted to examine how social influence, food preference, and health consideration influence traditional food choices among Malaysian university students. By identifying the motivations and barriers faced by this demographic, the research seeks to support cultural preservation efforts through community engagement, educational initiatives, and targeted policies. Strategies such as increasing the accessibility of traditional foods and fostering social settings that encourage their consumption can help revive young people’s participation in Malaysia’s culinary heritage. As SEO Borong (2025) mentioned, this is especially important as the country seeks to protect its culinary identity and promote traditional cuisine as a key attraction for halal and cultural tourism.

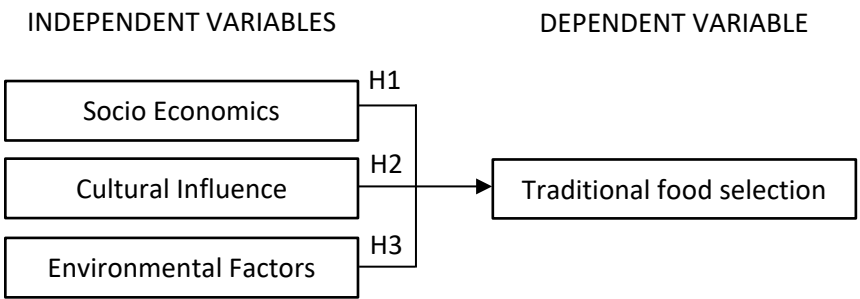


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework adopted from Ashari et al. (2022); Bidin Nurizzati et al. (2024) & Rahmat et al. (2021)

2 Literature Review

2.1 Traditional Food versus Heritage Food

Traditional food, which has been passed through generations in a particular area

and consists of all the indigenous food plants found in that locality, is representative of one's cultural identity in contrast to another, which can be identified with the source (Rahmat et al., 2021). These foods are frequently linked to cultural rituals, everyday dishes, and meaningful traditions, strengthening group identity and societal values. In addition, traditional food has long ties with the people of Malaysia, such that most recipes have been handed down from generation to generation with little or no changes in taste (Razlee Izzati et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that every culture has its representative ways of consuming food or eating, as it also portrays the belief systems and social divides within groups of society (Ramli et al., 2020).

Current studies show that valuing and consuming traditional food in young adults, particularly university students, is declining (Ahmad et al., 2024). This occurred due to a modern-day lifestyle, the influence of social networks, and notions of the convenience of fast food. Research by Rahmat et al. (2021) concluded that younger people value quick and trendy meals that indicate the trend on their social media personal rather than traditional notions of food. Moreover, eating traditional food values is a way of resisting cultural homogenization at a time of globalization. However, global food trends and the distancing by younger consumers from cultural practices jeopardize the ingredients of food heritage (Abdullah et al., 2024). It has been reported that many young people do not know the origins, ideas, and health benefits of traditional food (Tunde et al., 2023). This suggests the need for educational and promotional strategies to generate attention and interest in traditional food. As a result, the value of traditional foods in our everyday life is more than just a health issue; it involves cultural history, transferring knowledge between generations, and identity development. Thus, understanding how younger generations relate to traditional foods will be important to make sure these culinary gems will not be forgotten, treating them with respect, preserving them, and developing them authentically.

A heritage food, frequently used synonymously with traditional food, signifies recipes and cooking methods handed down through generations that are deeply connected to the cultural, historical, and ethnic identities of a community. These dishes are typically prepared with local ingredients, conventional cooking techniques, and are presented during celebrations, festivals, or regular meals, showcasing the values, beliefs, and social structures of a community (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). As of 2018, A total of 213 traditional Malaysian foods have been recognized as National Heritage and have been documented on Jabatan Warisan Negara website (Jabatan Warisan Negara, n.d.). For example, *nasi lemak*, *rendang*, *lemang*, *laksa*, and assorted *kuih-muih*. Each of these meals and foods communicates evidence of Malaysia's diverse multicultural heritage, with influences deriving from the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous people's cooking practices (Jalis et al., 2024). Each meal or dish has a story to tell, which connects us, evolves beyond simple taste, and relates also to family heritages, cultural pride, and common identity.

Heritage food is vital to sustaining cultural continuity in a diverse country like Malaysia, where food is often a cultural unifying symbol. However, acknowledgement and consumption of traditional food seems to be diminishing among youth, especially

university students, as their lifestyles and tastes in food change (Abdullah et al., 2024). Culinary changes among younger consumers are shaped by convenience, aesthetics, social media fads, and exposure to international foods, which cause many to regard heritage food as outdated, unhealthy, or laborious. This indirectly halts the transmission of culinary knowledge and contributes to the fact that many young people are not familiar with traditional cookery and ingredients (Tunde et al., 2023).

A radical change presents a risk to the preservation of heritage foods. Abdullah et al. (2024) stress the importance of innovation in the traditional food sector as a means of ensuring the continuity and viability of heritage foods for contemporary purposes. This can happen through the re-conceptualization of traditional dishes by earlier presentation, cooking with healthier methods, or merging traditional foods and culinary ways with modern food traditions. However, it is essential that this innovation is carefully used to preserve the authenticity and cultural practices of the original traditional recipes.

Aside from being culturally relevant, heritage food also has considerable economic potential, especially in tourism and halal food context. According to Jalis et al. (2024), Malaysia's traditional cuisines present a viable opportunity to attract tourists from both the local and international circuits. Cultural food trails, traditional food fairs, and halal heritage food experiences enhance cultural tourism and national identity. Zrnic et al. (2021) also indicated that tourists are increasingly searching for authentic food experiences that are intrinsically linked to the local culture, and heritage food can be seen as an asset in sustaining tourism.

2.2 The Influence of Social Influence on Traditional Food

Social influence may be defined as an alteration in one's views, feelings, attitudes, or behavior because of interaction with others or groups (Razlee Izzati et al., 2022). It is a major aspect of food choices and behaviors, especially with college students. It also includes family, friends, social media, and cultural norms. Razlee Izzati et al. (2022) also mentioned that the concept of social influence as modifications to thoughts, feelings, or behavior because of interactions with others. Social influences particularly affect traditional cuisine through young people's motivation regarding food choices. Similarly, social influences can be motivating or inhibiting for young people interested in traditional cuisine. Recent studies have shown that young adults often make their food decisions based on social norms, particularly in social settings like dining halls or out with friends (Ahmad et al., 2024). Students may choose modern or trendy food options rather than traditional ones because they want to be socially accepted, are influenced by their peers, or want a sense of belonging, even if they have a history with those dishes from their youth.

Previous literature found that decisions made concerning food by school children are determined by the preferences made by their parents (Rahmat et al., 2021). The consumption and practices of Malay traditional food should start at home because childhood behavior often becomes behavior in adulthood (Raji et al., 2017). According

to Mohd Fikri et al. (2021), when family members teach and support traditional food making, young adults tend to preserve this food knowledge and develop pride in their culture. The act of food preparation, celebrating traditional food during festive times, and sharing family recipes accentuate the emotional and cultural reasons identified with traditional food.

In addition, shared cultural events, such as community food festivals or university cultural days, support social engagement with traditional foods. These events establish and celebrate traditional foods, making them clearer for people to recognize and accept as socially normative and even desirable with friends. Together with social marketing initiatives and collaborations with social media influencers portraying traditional foods as healthy, cool, or sustainable, these events are being recognized as effective ways to attract the interest of younger audiences (Ahmad et al., 2024). Based on prior studies, researcher hypothesize that social influence significantly affects students' traditional food choices (H1).

2.3 The Influence of Food Preference on Traditional Food

Food preference comes from a complex interaction of personal taste, culture, psychology, and environmental situations. For students at the university, these preferences are largely based on their sensory memories of food, coupled with the influence of their peer group and available options to them, health awareness, and, more recently, electronic media. The food preferences that were grounded in cultural customs are often handed down generationally. However, contemporary trends and globalization are changing cultural customs in food choice among current and future generations.

According to Man Hong & Yee Ming (2023), young adults often prioritize taste, aesthetic appeal, and convenience over tradition or nutritional value, or even simply foods that fit their lifestyles. There is a tendency to neglect foods that are labelled as traditional, that are seen as labor-intensive, or that have a traditional connotation. Ahmad et al. (2024) also highlights that food trends that are shared on social media influence students' adoption norms, which have often included fast food and international cuisine if they had the chance to choose instead of traditional regional food.

Research studies suggest that food preference is not immutable and can be positively altered by exposure and education. According to Mohd Fikri et al. (2021) cooking workshops, cultural food events, and storytelling surrounding traditional food improved young adults' appreciation for heritage foods and desire to consume them. Similarly, Rahmat et al. (2021) believe that reconnecting students to traditional food preparation and cultural stories will improve the likelihood that they will incorporate these foods into their diets.

Cultural identity can also determine preferences (Atkin et al., 2021). Food and eating traditions are closely linked to cultural and ethnic identity. People, including students, who strongly connect with their ethnic roots tend to prefer and participate

more in preparing traditional dishes. This is because food acts as a meaningful symbol and expression of one's identity, both personally and in the eyes of others (Anderson et al., 2021). In contrast, individuals who have assimilated more to global food culture might exhibit less enthusiasm for traditionally prepared food unless it is created in a modern way (Abdullah et al., 2024). Food preferences are also based on sensory appeal, price, availability, and/or dietary requirements. For instance, Mohd Aris et al. (2022) found that traditional snacks like *kerepek* are still being favored by young adults in part due to availability and the appeal of flavor, while other traditional foods are used less often. Based on prior studies, researcher hypothesize that food preference has a positive influence on traditional food selection (H2).

2.4 The Influence of Health Considerations on Traditional Food

Health considerations significantly impact food selection among university students. Health is the general well-being of a person's physical, mental, and social self. Ashari et al. (2022) defined health as either being well or ill. Researchers suggest that health-conscious university students prioritize nutrient-dense diets based on the authentic ingredients, which can shape people's perceptions of traditional and ethnic food (Bidin et al., 2024). Traditional foods, generally created with natural and minimal ingredients, are generally healthier than fast food or highly processed foods. Furthermore, traditional foods, as outlined by Al Mamun et al. (2020), are filled with fiber, phytonutrients, and beneficial carbohydrates, proteins, and fats contributing to general health. However, the publicity that traditional foods are fatty or outdated will always deter younger consumers. This misconception, along with the intense marketing of Western-style foods, leads to the complete transition from traditional eating behavior (Ahmad et al., 2024).

Health factors also intersect with body image and eating culture among young people. Social media regularly promotes adverse health trends or restrictive eating patterns that cause students to avoid typical carbohydrate-rich meals in favor of "trendy" options that display the appearance of being healthier. Ashari et al. (2022) found that when nutritional education was paired with cultural food literacy, students' appreciation for traditional meals was amplified while misperceptions about their health benefits were dispelled. Furthermore, the presence of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among young Malaysians, such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, has raised consciousness about food choices. Abdullah et al. (2024) suggested that promoting traditional foods as preventive measures for health issues may help spur healthier eating habits. Traditional meals like *ulam*, *ikan bakar*, and *bubur lambuk* are familiar, nutrient-dense options that align with current eating practices when prepared with minimal oil and sugar. Based on prior studies, researcher hypothesize that health consideration has a positive influence on traditional food selection (H3).

3 Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design to

explore the factors influencing traditional food selection among university students. To gather the data, a structured online questionnaire was developed, allowing students to respond conveniently while enabling the collection of broad, measurable insights related to the study’s objectives.

The target population for this study consists of students from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu, with a total of 4776 students enrolled. The total number of students was based on official records from the Academic Affairs Division’s database. Convenience sampling was chosen in this study because it offered a practical and efficient way to access the target population of university students. The researchers needed to collect data from a large group within a limited timeframe, and convenience sampling made it possible to reach respondents quickly through online platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and social media. This approach minimized logistical challenges and costs while ensuring that the required sample size (356 responses) was achieved, as calculated using the Raosoft sample size calculator. Moreover, since the study specifically targeted students from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu, convenience sampling through existing student networks was appropriate and aligned with the study’s objectives. The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies (Rahmat et al., 2021; Ashari et al., 2022 & Bidin et al., 2024) and modified to fit this study. There are two (2) parts in the questionnaire. The respondents’ demographic profile is in Section A, while Section B assesses the factors of traditional food selection elements such as social influence, food preferences and health considerations. A pilot study was conducted on 30 students from the Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management to test the instrument, specifically to ascertain whether respondents would understand the questionnaire. A Google Form was used to create the questionnaire, and the link was shared through WhatsApp, Telegram, and social media. Before conducting the survey, the researchers contacted students via messenger. Subsequently, upon completion, the data gathered from the pilot study were tested using Cronbach’s Alpha. This was to ensure the instrument’s reliability which should show the correlation of each item (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The result of the reliability test is tabulated in Table 1. All variables in this study scored above 0.7, showing that the questionnaire items were reliable and consistently measured what they were supposed to measure.

Table 1: Reliability Test

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha
Social Influences	0.753
Food Preferences	0.754
Health Consideration	0.700

N=30

4 Findings

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis, which uses means and standard deviations based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), was used to measure each item in all dimensions of social influences, food preferences, and health considerations.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis for Social Preferences

Item	Mean	SD
I was influenced by people around me regarding which traditional food I should consume.	3.45	1.229
I consumed Malaysian food traditional according to my friend's suggestion	3.42	1.193
I consumed traditional food because people around me think that I should	3.44	1.238
I tend to consume traditional food because it went viral on the internet or social media	3.44	1.262

N = 356, SD: Standard Deviation

Table 2 showed that most respondents agree that social factors and awareness influence their traditional food choices. The highest mean reflects agreement that the factors of traditional food selection among university students were influenced by the people around them, followed by the statement that traditional food went viral on social media, and they should consume traditional food in the second ranking. However, the lowest agreed-upon statement was consuming traditional food, as suggested by a friend.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis for Food Preferences

Item	Mean	SD
I prefer to consume Malaysian traditional food compared to western or other kinds of food	3.58	1.202
I would rather choose Malaysian traditional food	3.67	1.162
I am likely to eat Malaysian local food most of the time	3.72	1.217
I will choose traditional food for my meal	3.67	1.214

N = 356, SD: Standard Deviation

Table 3 presents the mean and ranking for the statements related to food preferences and traditional food selection. The highest agreement was on the statement that students like to eat Malaysian local food most of the time. This was followed by the statement that students like to eat Malaysian traditional food compared to Western or other kinds of food. However, the lowest agreement was on the statement that students prefer to choose Malaysian traditional food and choose traditional food as their meal.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis for Health Consideration

Item	Mean	SD
Contains natural ingredients	3.74	1.168
Is nutritious and keeps me healthy	3.63	1.190
Helps me control my weight	3.45	1.177
Contains no artificial ingredients	3.56	1.233

N = 356, SD: Standard Deviation

Table 4 highlights how students perceive the health aspects of traditional food. Respondents agreed more that traditional food contains natural ingredients, which makes it appealing from a health perspective. This was followed by the belief that traditional food is nutritious and helps them stay healthy, as well as the idea that it does not contain artificial ingredients. However, the statement that traditional food helps control weight received the least agreement, showing that students may not fully associate traditional dishes with maintaining their body weight.

4.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

Objective 1: To determine which factors most influence traditional food selection among university students.

		Correlations			
		Traditional Food	Social Influence	Food Preference	Health Consideration
Traditional Food	Pearson Correlation	1	.454**	.624**	.656**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	356	356	356	356
Social Influences	Pearson Correlation	.454**	1	.501**	.547**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	356	356	356	356
Food Preference	Pearson Correlation	.624**	.501**	1	.617**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	356	356	356	356
Health Consideration	Pearson Correlation	.656**	.547**	.617**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	356	356	356	356

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Pearson correlation coefficients show that health consideration ($r=0.656$, $p<0.00$) and food preference ($r=0.624$, $p<0.001$) have strong positive correlations with traditional food selection, while social influence has a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.454$, $p<0.001$).

Correlation coefficients (r) measure the strength and direction of relationships individually, without considering the effects of other predictors. Therefore, to identify the most influential factor, multiple regression analysis was employed, as it assesses the unique contribution of each predictor while controlling the others. In this study, although health consideration had the highest correlation with traditional food selection ($r=0.656$, $p<0.001$), the regression results confirmed that it also had the largest standardized Beta coefficient ($\beta=0.417$, $p<0.001$), indicating it was the most influential factor when all predictors were considered together.

Objective 2: To determine the relationship between social influences, food preferences, and health considerations towards traditional food selection among university students.

In this study, researchers applied both correlation and regression analyses to examine the relationship and predictive strength of three independent variables, which are social influence, food preference, and health consideration, on students' traditional food selection. Correlation analysis was first conducted to determine whether there was a significant linear relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable. This helped researchers confirm whether associations existed. Following this, we used regression analysis to identify which factor had the strongest influence on traditional food selection. Regression allowed us to determine not only the direction of influence but also the predictive power of each variable. This two-step approach provides both a broad understanding of associations and a focused view on prediction.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p	Decision
H1	Social Influence → Traditional Food	0.056	0.221	Not Supported
H2	Food Preference → Traditional Food	0.338	0.000	Supported
H3	Health Consideration → Traditional Food	0.417	0.000	Supported

The results of this study show that food preferences and health considerations significantly and positively influenced students' selection of traditional foods, whereas social influence was not a significant predictor. This indicates that university students' food decisions are increasingly guided by individual motives rather than collective or peer-driven factors. Students reported that their enjoyment, taste satisfaction, and familiarity with traditional foods strongly shaped their choices. This aligns with studies showing that young adults tend to prioritize sensory appeal, convenience, and personal liking when deciding what to eat (Man Hong & Yee Ming, 2023). Traditional food that is flavorful, comforting, and accessible fits their personal lifestyle preferences. Unlike older generations, who may consume traditional food primarily out of cultural duty, students select it because they genuinely enjoy the taste or find it fits their eating habits. This highlights the shift from tradition-driven to hedonic-driven consumption patterns.

Health consideration emerged as the most influential factor ($\beta=0.417$). This suggests that students perceive traditional food as healthier compared to processed or fast food because it often uses natural ingredients, minimal processing, and traditional

cooking techniques. The growing prevalence of health-related concerns among youth, such as obesity and lifestyle diseases, has heightened awareness of nutrition. Social media trends around "clean eating" and wellness further reinforce the association of traditional dishes with authentic, wholesome, and nutritious eating (Bidin et al., 2024). Hence, traditional food is reinterpreted not only as cultural heritage but also as a health-conscious choice in modern student diets.

Social influence was not significant to students' food choices. Despite Malaysia's collectivist traditions, where food practices are often shaped by family and social norms, this study found that peer or societal pressures did not significantly influence students' food choices. A possible reason is that university students experience a high degree of independence and autonomy compared to earlier life stages. Away from home, they make food choices based on personal priorities rather than family expectations. In addition, globalized food culture and exposure to diverse cuisines may weaken the role of peer influence in promoting traditional food, as trendy or international foods are more socially "shareable" on digital platforms.

5 Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research has some limitations. Initially, the study focuses solely on university students, which limits the applicability of the results to different demographic groups like working adults, school-aged children, or those in rural areas. Secondly, depending on self-reported information from surveys can lead to bias, such as social desirability and recall bias, which might influence the precision of responses concerning traditional food choices. In addition, the study may also have applied only to specific control campuses or areas, which could mask broader differences in food choices for Malaysia's ethnic and cultural diversity. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe changes in behaviours or perceptions over time.

Future research should consider a larger sample that could include individuals from different regions, ages, and cultures so that the findings could be more representative. Qualitative methodologies of focus group discussions or in-depth interviews might better explain the cultural and emotional factors related to traditional food choices. Also, researchers could utilize behavioral tracking methods such as food diaries or electronic food diaries to gain real-time information on real-life food choices. Comparative studies may also provide a more in-depth understanding of the contrasting meanings of traditional food for different ethnic groups and between urban and rural students.

Furthermore, the research focused only on three predictors which are social influence, food preferences, and health considerations. While these variables provided meaningful insights, they do not capture the full range of factors that may affect traditional food selection. Future research could incorporate other predictors such as price sensitivity, marketing and promotional strategies, and convenience or accessibility of traditional foods, which are increasingly relevant in shaping student food choices in modern contexts.

Next, this study employed a quantitative survey method, which provided measurable patterns but may have overlooked the deeper cultural and emotional meanings attached to traditional foods. To address this, future studies could adopt qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, or ethnographic observations. These methods would allow researchers to capture richer, context-specific insights into how students negotiate traditional food choices in relation to identity, cultural heritage, and modern lifestyle demands.

6 Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights into the factors that drive traditional food selection among university students. The findings highlight that food preferences and health considerations are the main reasons students choose traditional food, while social influence plays a lesser role. In addition, these results reflect the shifting food culture among younger generations, where enjoyment and health perception are becoming central to food choices. This is consistent with previous who also found that taste, familiarity, and personal comfort strongly influence food decisions (Frez-Muñoz et al., 2024; Gitungwa & Gustafson, 2025). At the same time, the findings suggest that promoting traditional food cannot rely solely on cultural messaging or awareness campaigns. Instead, strategies should focus on making traditional food more appealing in terms of flavor and associating it with positive health outcomes. Besides that, stakeholders such as the food industry, cultural organizations, and health educators can design more engaging programs that combine taste experiences with health education. They can organize interactive food events such as cooking workshops, food fairs, and influencer campaigns, and social media content that highlights both the flavor and wellness aspects of traditional dishes could be effective ways to sustain traditional food culture among the younger generation. This study also contributes to the literature by showing that health and taste outweigh cultural pressures in shaping students' traditional food choices.

7 About the authors

Aiza Nur Syahmina Zainudin and Hanis Nazirah Jamaludin are currently a Bachelor's Degree students of Foodservice Management in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia.

Siti Nurhanifah Sulong and Nur Amanina Idris are lecturers in the Culinary Arts Department, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu, Malaysia. Their research interests are gastronomy and heritage food.

Muhamad Shah Kamal Ideris is currently a lecturer at the School of Tourism, Hospitality and Environmental Management, University Utara Malaysia (UUM), Kedah. His research interests focus on Hospitality, Culinary and Food Service Management.

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