

## Consumers' Preference towards Food Truck Business: A Case Study in Penang.

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### Abstract

The food truck business in the food and beverage industry is notably a highly competitive field. It is the most convenient food service and offers a variety of common local food. However, being able to fulfill customer expectations and demands becomes the most essential element to sustain growth and increase profit margin in this business. Thus, this research's objective is to investigate the consumers' preference towards the food truck business by focusing on three factors: variation of food, price, and the trends of the food truck business. This study is significant in supporting food truck activities and helping both vendors and customers to understand more on the variables that attracted them to the food truck market. A cross-sectional survey was carried out at higher educational institutions in Penang. The questionnaires were distributed to students who have experience buying a product from food truck. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed during the data collection procedure and out of these 300 questionnaires were completed and returned. The research found that there is a significant relationship between all factors toward consumers' preference for food truck business. Therefore, it can be concluded that students have positive views towards food trucks and will continuously support the business as long as their preferences and demands can be fulfilled by the vendors. This study can be used as a reference for the food truck vendors in addressing the weaknesses and fulfilling the demand to remain competitive in the industry.

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## INTRODUCTION

A food truck can be defined as a large vehicle equipped with facilities for cooking and selling food. The growth of the food truck business keeps on increasing from year to year (Choi et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2019; Bandaru & Venkateshwarlu, 2017; Myrick, 2016). Some people have found the food truck as the most convenient foodservice operation because of the mobility to do a business that can go anywhere as long the location is

strategic for the business to achieve the goal of selling point per day. It has influenced the opportunities of social, cultural, and economy for vendors and customers (Thomas, 2016). It varies from selling food that is outstanding for middle-class consumers such as western cuisine, pizza roll, and other favorite local snacks (Esparza et al., 2014). Furthermore, the food truck offers a variety of common local foods with a unique strategy like *cendol*, *tau fu fah*, Ramlee burger, and *luk-luk* (Ragavan, 2014). To summarize it, food truck businesses

can be flexible in the food business world that is full of competition in every aspect (Humston, 2012).

According to mobile-cuisine.com (2016), the food truck business offers a different perspective from the usual business. It includes creating a unique, relevant, and enduring brand position for the food truck and developing a solid understanding of those consumers' purchasing behaviors. It is not just the food, food truck comes together with entertainment, comfort, and warmth which make it different from one to another. Since the concept is unique, they become easily popular and offer a great opportunity and profit (Zahir, 2018).

The emerging food truck market in Malaysia seems to get a positive view among local consumers. In Malaysia, the food truck businesses have been popular in the Klang Valley area (Venner, 2014) and are in high demand among people living in the urban area (Rahayu et al., 2017). The trends of food trucks are led through Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. But the real factors that attract people to purchase at a food truck in Malaysia are still vague. Is it the quality of the food, the prices, or trends that influence the consumers to continue their purchases at the food truck? According to Hawk (2013), dining at gourmet food trucks represents a legitimate declaration of consumers' identity about individual beliefs and values.

The research's objective is to investigate factors influencing consumers' preference of food truck business from the view of students in Penang. Being able to fulfill customer expectations and demands becomes the most essential element to get sustainable growth and profit margin. This paper examines the perception and expectation of customers towards the food truck business in the food industry underpinning the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). The findings can contribute to the body of knowledge on the importance of understanding consumers' preference in the growth of the food truck business.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The food truck business in Malaysia showed rapid development in the past few years especially among the locals in Malaysia. It is because there is a significant image in everyone's mind when they hear about the food truck. Ibrahim (2011) stated that food trucks can act as a platform of social activity because of the trends that people are following from social networks. Furthermore, many programs and policies for young entrepreneurs are provided by the government to encourage young people to start businesses, and have

helped the growth of this convenience business (Ismail et al., 2018).

According to Burr (2010), food trucks especially the gourmet variety, have become a recent fixture on the gastronomic landscape. The variety of food, price, and the current trends among the locals are leading factors for consumers to go to the food truck. In a previous study by Southern Nevada Health District (2010), it is stated that services in terms of food trucks can be defined as food service trailers. It means the mobile food unit is designed to be parked on public roads and has an enclosed area for storage, handling, or preparation of food. It also has permitted the making of the business as mobile food units, the vehicle in which the foods and beverages are prepared, processed, and as a premise to sell to the customers. The services provided by food trucks can be a full-service coach, which means the mobile unit, includes the food service trailers where the foods and beverages may be stored, prepared, cooked, and/or served. Another option is by providing self-service area in which the consumers serve themselves with the pre-packaged foods that the mobile unit prepared for them to choose from.

According to Shepherd (1990), food choice is of interest for two main reasons; the first relates to the industry's interest in selling food products but the other concerns nutrition on how the food selection will improve people's diets. Another one is food choice is influenced by a wide range of factors. There are factors related to the food, to the person making the choice, and to the external economic and social environment in which the choice is made. Some chemical and physical properties of the food will be perceived by the person in terms of sensory attributes such as flavor, texture, or appearance (Sobal & Wansink, 2007). This includes the taste, shape, the smell of the foods, and other related factors that will change customer's perspectives towards food trucks' foods. Halal is also an important factor to be considered since the majority of the population in Malaysia are Muslims. The consumption of Halal food is unique, and it is different from other food consumptions (Hashim & Othman, 2011).

Taste preferences and food aversions are developed through experiences and are influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and expectations (Clarke, 1998). But when it comes to experience, taste is becoming the most essential element among factors variation of food towards consumers' preference of food truck. The influence of palatability on appetite and food intake in humans has been investigated in several studies (Sulaiman & Haron, 2013; Delwiche, 2004). There is an increase in food intake as palatability increases, but the effect of palatability on appetite in the period following consumption is unclear. Increasing food variety can also

increase food and energy intake and in short term alter energy balance (Sorensen et al., 2003). Food choices might be based on a great variety of factors, food preferences being one of them. By giving more choices, the customers can select according to their food preferences (Sulaiman & Haron, 2013). There are several other factors influencing food choices, such as health, price, convenience, mood, sensory appeal, natural content, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concerns (Stephoe et al., 1995).

Shepherd and Sparks (1994) pointed out that the model of food selection is useful for indicating which variables need to be measured in the food choice area. This includes the methods in which the relationships between attitudes and beliefs are looked at in a more structured manner which have been introduced earlier by social psychology researchers. These social psychology findings are like a barrier for people to make those easiest choices but is burdened with the availability. This includes the price of the products that the food truck sells.

Carpenter (2015) stated that many food carts failed because they spread themselves too thin, similar between one to another. He suggested making something different and unique at a good price. The best price with unique products and services may be related on some point but having a better price for the product will affect the customer perception of a food truck. Realizing that amassing the financial capital necessary to manage a restaurant during the recession would be a difficult duty for many professionals launched food trucks that required less investment (Ibrahim, 2011). A consumer's buying power represents his or her ability to make purchases. The economy affects buying power. For example, if prices decline, consumers have greater buying power (Boundless, 2016).

According to Tourism Intelligence Network (2015), the trend in food trucks is on an incline by using local food for business products. Local foods can be defined as food consumed within 100 miles of where it was produced (Hodges et al., 2014). It is because the consumers prefer something similar with their daily life with products that represent freshness, enriched flavor, higher nutritional and vitamin values. Research suggests customers are aware of the benefits of consuming local foods and are willing to pay for them.

Another factor that relates to the consumers' preference towards food trucks is the trends. Customers are looking for a unique dining experience and food truck operators provide a unique offering in the industry. According to Millennial Marketing (2013), millennials can't get enough of food trucks for several reasons; millennials respond well to food trucks with a heavy social media presence and the small, mobile businesses

allow for a more personalized interaction that keeps them coming back. The young entrepreneur that are so passionate to do business is motivated by the uniqueness of the food truck is also one of the reasons many creative marketing ideas emerge thru social media (Syed Marzuki et al., 2016)

The food truck industry has already become the word-of-mouth between the people, especially on the internet. The trends are spreading through the internet and have become the trending topic that people are talking about. The trends may be one of the factors where people change their perspective on food selection and look forward to preferring more on food trucks based on what those people are craving for. This kind of trend is also popular through mass media such as articles in the newspaper, a segment on the television, advertisement through radio, and many kinds of channels that may disseminate even more information about this food delivery strategy. By tapping into recent customer trends, particularly the use of social media and the growing desire for local food, the industry ushered in the era of the modern, gourmet food truck (Ibrahim, 2011). It was also found that food truck's consumers do enjoy the food truck scene as a change from restaurants in an open atmosphere. This represents the image of the food truck itself and most people respond to the graphics. They presume the more creative the graphics, the more creative the food is and acts as a strategy for the food truck business.

Food trucks are one of the hottest trends in the restaurant industry right now, and customers are showing increasing interest in mobile food service (Yoon & Chung, 2018). The food trucks are also becoming increasingly appealing to a more mainstream audience and white-collar demographic. With this evolution within the industry, a visit to a food truck has become a social activity that activates urban spaces and fosters community (Ibrahim, 2011). Petersen (2014) stated that the industry has recently tapped into powerful customer trends, particularly the use of social media and the desire for local food, ushering in the era of the modern, gourmet food truck.

The trend of the food truck has gone global, with the Food Network recently launching a reality TV show (Bernstein, 2010). The trend has also been spreading broadly around the globe since then. As a result, the food truck industry has achieved more improvements thanks to the trends that have been viralled by the customers or the vendors themselves. It meets customer expectations in terms of quick service, the variety of types that differ from home cooked meals, quality in terms of healthy food being served, and environmentally friendly (Conner, 2011). Moreover, a food truck is the

best place to experience urban street dining (Anenberg & Kung, 2014).

Factors of variation of food and price are the most important part to study on consumers' preference because behavioral intention might change based on the motivation of the customer (Ajzen, 1991; Sulaiman & Haron, 2013). Preferences are defined as an individual's attitude towards a set of objects especially in the decision-making process (Lichtenstein & Slovic, 2006) and it includes evaluative judgment in the sense of liking or disliking an object (Scherer, 2005). An individual has a set of preferences and values towards certain products and all of it depends on the individual's culture, education, individual tastes, and other kinds of factors. Ajzen (1991) argued that behavioral intentions reflect how hard a person is willing to try, and how motivated he or she is, to perform the behavior. These selected people are aware for them to go to food truck as they are willing to try a new thing based on what he or she has been motivated by some of the factors that make them prefer food truck's food at a particular time. Zerrer (2011) stated that the recent success of gourmet food trucks depends on a variety of reasons that highlight local consumers' sensibilities. Along with serving great food, gourmet food trucks are small businesses, and people are attracted to unique food. According to Hawk (2013), it seemed that there was considerable consumers' interest in the food truck's operational history. It is important to discover the importance of the elements that affect the future behavioral intentions of the young consumer (Sulaiman & Haron, 2013). The service providers need to understand how consumers choose and evaluate their offerings to be competitive in the food industry (Zeithaml, 1988).

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

To get the respondents' feedback, 400 sets of questionnaires were distributed. A cross-sectional survey was used. The sampling frames are active students studying in private and public colleges and universities in Penang who have experienced buying from food trucks. Roscoe (1975) proposed the following rules of thumb for determining sample size cited from Sekaran (2007), sample sizes larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate for most research.

The study is focused on the factors that determine customer's preference towards food trucks' business among higher education institution students in Penang in line with the Theory of Planned Behavior. The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts-demographic, variation of food, price, and trends of food truck business. The questionnaire items were

adapted from the research by Birtsch and Kline (2016) and Petersen (2014).

SPSS software is used to calculate the frequencies, testing data reliability and hypothesis. In response to these three hypotheses of the study, the standard multiple regressions are used. This analysis is appropriate to confirm the earlier sections related to the variation of food, price, and trends towards consumer preferences. Pallant (2005) and Stevens (1996) explained that multiple regressions are a family of techniques used to explore the relationship between one continuous dependent variable (criterion) and several independent variables (predictors) and further address a variety of research questions.

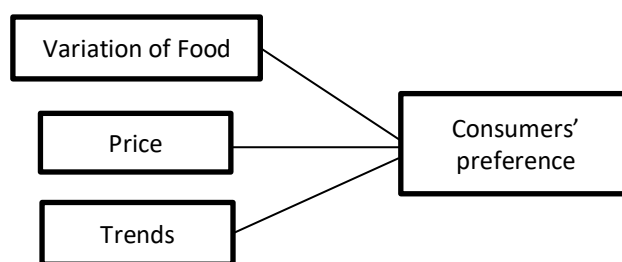


Figure 1: Study Framework of the research

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Reliability Analysis

Part A consists of the items that measure the dimensions for variation of food, price, and trends of food truck business. They respectively achieved the value of 0.814, 0.796, and 0.816. Part B consisted of the items for the customer preference with the value of 0.871. This indicates that all section of variables is reliable for this study.

### 4.2. Demographic Analysis

The results of the demographic profiles are based on 300 respondents. 48% (144) respondents are male and 52% (156) are female, within the age of 18-30 years old who had experienced as consumers of food truck business. From the 300 respondents, 60% (180) were diploma students while 40% (120) were degree students. Most of them have food truck experience more than 3 times in the last 6 months (43%) followed by 102 respondents (34%) with 2-3 times and only 69 respondents (23%) with first time experience.

### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Based on Table 1, the result shows that the variation of food elements was able to clarify 33 percent ( $R^2 = .33$ ,  $F\text{-change} = 71.835$ ,  $p < .001$ ) of the variance in the consumers' preference. The outcomes demonstrated that the variation of food elements of respondents

significantly contributed to the prediction of consumers' preference. To determine the contribution of the independent variable; it is essential to use the beta ( $\beta$ ) values by ignoring any negative signs out the front (Pallant, 2005). As the variation of food elements were found to be significantly and positively influence consumer preferences  $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .001$ , it can be said that the assumption on the consumers' preference due to the variation of food offered by food trucks operator are apparent and thus hypothesis one is strongly supported. This showed that the factors are the most essential aspects that influence the consumer to purchase at a food truck.

Table 1 Results of multiple regressions of the variation of food with consumers' preference

Predictors	Model 1 Std. $\beta$
<b>Step 1: Model Variables Variation of food elements</b>	.57 ***
$R^2$	.33
Adj. $R^2$	.32
$R^2$ Change	.33
F-Change	71.835***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The variation of food towards a certain food market can influence people to make a purchase. Increasing food variety can also increase food and energy intake and in the short term alter energy balance (Sorensen et al., 2003). This mean that the more types of food sold at the food truck, the more people might see food truck as their destination. In the previous study, taste and food aversions developed through experiences are influenced by attitudes, beliefs, and expectations (Clarke, 1998). Variety plays a role in attracting the consumers to try more than one product so that they can evaluate which food taste met their preference more. This is supported by the finding that most of the respondents agreed that they see the food trucks offer more than one type of food. But all the respondents that the researcher met said that they chose the food at the food truck as their priority before looking at the price that the vendor set up for their products.

Table 2 Results of multiple regressions of the price with consumers' preference

Predictors	Model 1 Std. B
<b>Step 1: Model Variables Price of Food</b>	.34***

$R^2$	.12
Adj. $R^2$	.11
$R^2$ Change	.12
F-Change	19.499***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Looking at Table 2, the price of food as a factor manages to explain only 12 percent ( $R^2 = .12$ , F-change = 19.499,  $p < .001$ ) of the variance in the consumers' preference. The price of food dimension was found to significantly and positively influence consumers' preference. The value of  $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .000$  demonstrated that the element of price has given a slight impact on the preferences among the consumers. In sum, this second hypothesis is supported. The factor of price also has influenced different decisions among the consumers. 50% of the participants prefer to have the food at the food truck cost less than RM20. The status of the respondents as students reflects the purchasing power as consumers.

Table 3 Results of multiple regressions of the trends with consumer preferences

Predictors	Model 1 Std. $\beta$
<b>Step 1: Model Variables Trends</b>	.33***
$R^2$	.11
Adj. $R^2$	.11
$R^2$ Change	.11
F-Change	18.531***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

On the other hand, in Table 3, the trends of food factors manage to explain only 11 percent ( $R^2 = .11$ , F-change = 18.531,  $p < .001$ ) of the variance in the consumers' preference. The trends of food dimension were found to significantly and positively influence consumers' preference. The value of  $\beta = .33$ ,  $p < .000$  demonstrated that the element of trend have given a slight impact on the preferences among the consumers. In sum, this third hypothesis is also supported. Based on the factor of trend, the food truck operators have been using social media marketing to advertise their business. It is because social media marketing involved less cost for advertising. It has been found that consumers are more likely to activate strong ties than weak ties when actively searching for information (Brown & Reingen, 1987) because strong ties tend to be high-quality relationships (Bian, 1997; Portes, 1998). This means that when trend conquered the social network at one point, most people will try to find out

what is exactly the latest trend on the network . Taking Malaysia food truck's trends, with most respondents owning the social network accounts, trends may easily influence them towards the food truck. In their age, all of them have social network account and 45% from the respondents agreed that they know food truck from trends that are viral across the social network. About 49% of respondents were found to purchase more food truck products based on the trends they heard.

The food truck business in Malaysia showed rapid development in the past few years. It is because there are significant thoughts among the consumers regarding food trucks. The food truck business represents unique cuisine, and this attracts the consumers to choose food truck as one of the foodservice providers. The emerging events around Malaysia also contributed to the factors of growth and demand of the food truck business. As it is mobile, the operators can always participate in the events around the local community. Moreover, food truck businesses are already accepted by local and tourist destinations for the people to explore and taste the unique local food. Overall, it can be concluded that students have positive views towards food trucks and will continuously support the business if their preferences and demands can be fulfilled by the vendors.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that all the three variables: variation of food, price, and trends affecting consumers' preference towards food trucks. The food truck market is interesting and seen as a competitor for other food industries. It is unique and has already been in existence for decades in the food industry around the globe.

The food truck is a platform that can generate benefits to both the society and economic status of a country. The first thing that came before everything is the marketing factor of the food which is not only supported by word-of-mouth (WOM) but also electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM). This leads to virality in social media, where the factor of the trends in the food truck market was born. Succeeding the two factors, by the psychology purchasing power, consumers that are viewing food trucks as an attraction for them need to choose either from the selection of food at the food truck which is worth for them to buy or not. One of the factors they see is the price availability for a product, in which customers decide on its worthiness.

The findings can be used as a basis to understand the preference of consumers that come and

purchase at the food truck. This study can be used to assist the food truck vendors to understand their customers more and pay more attention to the three main factors. This will help to overcome the weaknesses and subsequently come out with a solution to improve the business.

Future research can be conducted to study other backgrounds of customers that have more purchasing power such as middle-income earners and professionals. It can also focus on other factors representing food truck such as the image and location. At the end of the day, it is hoped that the food truck business could sustain itself as one of the markets that are highly demanded by consumers in the future food industry.

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