

“I am not afraid to try this food!” Determinants of Tourists' Risk Acceptance, Willingness-to-Try and Insights for Enhancing Food Tourism Strategies in Perhentian, Terengganu, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Food consumption plays a crucial role in the tourism experience, yet understanding the factors that influence tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the interplay of financial, environmental, health, and service-related factors that impact tourists' decisions to engage with local cuisine. The problem lies in the limited exploration of how various risks and motivators affect WTT, particularly in emerging markets like Malaysia. While previous research has focused on food safety and cultural experience, the role of servicescape, self-motivation, and information-seeking behaviour is underexplored. This research utilized a qualitative methodology, employing semi-structured interviews combined with photo-elicitation to capture in-depth insights from European tourists at Perhentian Island, Terengganu. The

study aims to identify the primary factors influencing WTT and how potential risks can be leveraged by restaurants, tour operators, and local authorities to enhance the food tourism experience. Data was gathered from 20 European participants, with discussions revolving around their risk concerns, trust issues, memorable experiences, and curiosity about local food. The findings revealed that financial affordability, environmental sustainability, health risk, trust in food safety, and positive service encounters significantly influence WTT. Self-motivation, online reviews, and positive service encounters also emerged as critical drivers for exploring unfamiliar foods. The research contributes to the existing literature by filling the gap in understanding the dynamic role of environment, service encounters, and trust in their dining experience. The study's contributions highlight the importance of promoting food safety, environmental sustainability, and positive service experiences in boosting food tourism. This research provides actionable insights for restaurants, tour operators, and local authorities to improve food tourism strategies, ultimately fostering economic growth in the tourism sector.

Keywords: *Risk, Malaysia, Willingness-To-Try, Tourist Food Consumption, Small Island*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tourists are more inclined to acquire novel experiences during their vacations by seeking out or consuming local cuisine in the respective country. Consequently, local cuisine serves as a valuable resource within the tourism sector and has been strategically utilized by service providers and regional or national destinations for promotional purposes. The interconnection between gastronomy and tourism is pivotal for economic growth and development in numerous nations and has emerged as a fundamental factor in attracting tourists, thereby enhancing their expenditure. Nevertheless, tourists' perceptions of risk significantly affect their consumption of local food, which in turn influences their decisions to partake in local culinary offerings during their travels. This association is influenced by a multitude of factors, including perceptions regarding food safety, sustainability, cultural familiarity, and individual characteristics such as food neophobia. Extensive research has been dedicated to exploring the relationships between tourism and the diverse cultures of destinations, encompassing areas such as heritage tourism experiences (Chen & Chen, 2010; De Rojas & Camamero, 2008) and museum experiences (Sheng & Chen, 2012). Comprehending these dynamics is essential for tourism stakeholders who aspire to enhance local food experiences and advocate for sustainable tourism practices. Limited research has been conducted concerning the perceived risks associated with unfamiliar Asian local cuisines (Shafieizadeh et al., 2021).

Research investigating the diverse characteristics and criteria associated with risk factors about the consumption of Malaysian local cuisine among international tourists necessitates further exploration, particularly due to the influence of individual perceptions of potential hazard characteristics on their responses to various risks. The foundational research aimed at comprehending tourist risk acceptance about local food has not been comprehensively addressed to date. A review of the existing literature indicates that numerous studies have predominantly concentrated on the food-related experiences of tourists (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Chang et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2009, 2013; Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012, 2013). Furthermore, investigations focusing on the food-related risk perception of tourists within the tourism sector remain markedly insufficient. Notably, the issue of health risks associated with food consumption is of significant concern to tourists, as it has the potential to disrupt their planned activities while on vacation. This situation underscores the necessity for additional research to enhance the understanding of risks related to intentional behaviour, particularly within the specific context of small island destinations in Terengganu, Malaysia. Island tourism has rapidly expanded and emerged as one of the most popular types of the global tourism industry (Ng et al., 2017). Given this context, there is a lack of research examining Western tourists' perceptions of risk and their willingness to try local cuisine on small islands (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Jalis et al., 2009). Consequently, the present study seeks to analyze the various factors influencing European tourists' risk acceptance and, in turn, how this acceptance impacts their willingness to try (WTT) the local cuisine available on Perhentian Island, Terengganu.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Changing Facets of Tourist Food Consumption

The significance of food within the realm of tourism has steadily garnered attention as a key attraction or impetus for travel, with a multitude of studies substantiating the assertion that culinary offerings play a crucial role in marketing and contribute to the overall success of the tourism industry (e.g., World Travel Food Association, 2024; Mak et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2011). The multifaceted role of food in tourism has been examined from various perspectives, including its function as an attraction, a component of the product, an experiential element, a cultural phenomenon, and a nexus between tourism and food production. Furthermore, the growing focus on sustainability and ethical consumption is transforming tourist expectations concerning local culinary experiences. Contemporary travelers exhibit a heightened propensity to pursue not only authentic gastronomic offerings but also those that resonate with their environmental principles, such as farm-to-table initiatives or organic products. This evolution mirrors a broader trend wherein tourists aspire to forge more profound connections with the destinations they explore, frequently driven by the desire to bolster local economies and safeguard cultural heritage through culinary practices (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2019). Tourists' perceptions surrounding the safety of local food, encompassing aspects such as freshness, trustworthiness, and transparency, are instrumental in shaping their willingness to engage with local cuisines. Concerns regarding preservatives and nutritional integrity constitute significant determinants that influence tourists' decisions to sample regional dishes (Baby & Joseph, 2023). Birch and Memery (2020) further highlighted the intention-behavior gap, wherein tourists articulate interest in local culinary offerings yet refrain from partaking, a phenomenon attributable to perceived obstacles such as doubts about the authenticity of local products, quality concerns, and insufficient marketing and distribution efforts.

The consumption of food by tourists is intricately linked to the food service sector (Nield et al., 2000), the consumption of local foods (Kim et al., 2009), gastronomic experiences associated with tourism, as well as the preferences and choices of tourists regarding food (Chang et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies advanced our comprehension of tourist food consumption, establishing that knowledge of food constitutes a principal factor influencing tourist food consumption (Frisvoll et al., 2015). Furthermore, the food consumption patterns of tourists may significantly impact the economic viability and sustainable competitiveness of hospitality enterprises operating within the nation. This consumption is profoundly influenced by social demands, the quest for novelty, and the quality of service provided at tourist destinations (Tsai, 2016). Local food can be characterized by the specific place or region of its production, encompassing indigenous food and beverages that are cultivated and manufactured locally, thereby reflecting local identities (Stalmirska & Ali, 2023; Chang et al., 2010).

Each individual who partakes in local culinary experiences may assess their risk exposure. In the realm of tourism research, it has been posited that the decision-making process on travel destination selections encompasses an inherent potential for travelers to engage in risk-taking behavior (Kim & Park, 2016; Williams & Balāza, 2013). Risk is characterized as the uncertainty encountered by individuals when they are unable to predict the outcomes of their purchasing decisions (Jeansen, Lindberg, & Østergaard, 2015). The relevant question is whether tourists are inclined to embrace the risk associated with the consumption of Malaysian local cuisine.

2.2 Risks taking and the 'others local food'

According to the study by Belanche et al. (2012), perceived risk was identified as having a beneficial effect on customer satisfaction. Moreover, misinformation, including ambiguous food product labels, as well as the pros and cons associated with food items, significantly impacts the way consumers perceive risk, which is further influenced by the level of consumer knowledge (Martinez-Poveda et al., 2009). Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) categorized tourists into three distinct groups. This classification was based on their perception of risk: risk-neutral, functional risk, and place risk. Furthermore, perceptions of risk and their correlation with international tourism research have been shown to differ according to nationality (Seddighi

et al., 2001). Their findings indicated that the levels of perceived risks varied among different Western European tourists.

Deliberated risk-taking serves as a significant indicator of an individual's acceptance of risk, whether in the realms of physicality, social interaction, or a synthesis of both dimensions. This phenomenon entails purposeful engagement that necessitates the pursuit of novel experiences to elicit feelings of anxiety (Levinson, 1990). Such risk can arise from an array of factors, including a lack of familiarity with indigenous customs, potential health implications, and the overall caliber of the culinary experience. The trust placed in individuals who manage these risks has been shown to correlate, both directly and indirectly, with the acceptance of risk (Huang et al., 2013). Furthermore, acquiring consumer trust is a complex endeavour, as various factors, including emotional states, can significantly influence risk acceptance through risk perception (Young et al. 2015). By accepting these risks, it is indicative that tourists are prepared to engage in the culinary offerings. Loh and Hassan (2021) also stated acceptance of food is reflected in a consumer's intention to purchase it. Prior research has identified factors that affect the willingness to try new foods. Consumers' willingness to try is largely influenced by their expectations and attitudes toward the food products (Stone et al., 2022). Choe & Cho (2011) demonstrated that individuals with a greater familiarity with foods exhibit a higher or comparable willingness to try them. Additionally, Illichmann & Abdulai (2013) discovered that males display a greater willingness to try food compared to their female counterparts. The concepts of willingness to try and risk acceptance are interrelated within the decision-making processes of tourists. As a result, risk perception, benefit perception, and trust are integral components influencing this acceptance of risk (Bronfman et al. 2012; Huang et al. 2010, 2013). This study explores risk perception from European tourists' dining perceptives, which was carried out in various tourist spots and restaurants located on Perhentian Island, Terengganu. Using a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews and visual methods, this study aims to propose the Western tourist risk acceptance framework on local food consumption at Perhentian Island.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Utilizing a mixed qualitative method; semi-structured interviews incorporated with photo elicitation, this investigation engaged twenty European tourists to elucidate their comprehensive perceived risk involving unfamiliar food in uncertainty, with a specific emphasis on their willingness to try local cuisine during their sojourns on Perhentian Island, located in Terengganu. These participants came from various parts of Europe including France, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Denmark, and Sweden.

Perhentian islands are comprised of two small-island destinations (SID) primarily; Perhentian Kecil and Perhentian Besar. These remote and diminutive islands as research sites are predicated upon their prominence as well as their historical significance as a well-trodden trail for backpackers within Southeast Asia, characterized by a substantial influx of both international and domestic tourists along the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Shukri et al., 2018; Ismail et al., 2012; Weng, 2009). A purposive sampling strategy was implemented, facilitating the recruitment of participants capable of furnishing nuanced and comprehensive insights on risk mitigating factors regarding local food consumption. In light of the limited participant pool, this study does not aspire to deliver an analysis that encapsulates the entirety of international tourists; rather, it aims to present a meticulous examination of the narratives shared by a select group of participants (Yen et al., 2018) who are enthusiastic consumers of food and are inclined to disclose risk perception relative to their eating experiences with local cuisine during their holiday on the islands.

The semi-structured interview consisted of three parts which were; demographic, local food and risk acceptance, and willingness-to-try. For photo elicitation technique; it was used mainly as probes to enrich data. The visual approach comprised 6 selected images of local cuisine (Figure 1), where participants were probed on their perceived risk to explore factors that mitigate risk. The interviews were guided by how the tourist perceives local food; what they think about local food; what motivates them to buy local food; how they accept the risk; Novelty seeking and risk acceptance; followed by their willingness- to try local food (Siegrist., 2008; Choe & Cho., 2011; Mynttinen et al., 2015; Chang & Lu., 2018).



Figure 1: Photo elicitation technique showing some Perhentian island's local food, that was used as probes during semi-structured interviews

The data collection was carried out at Perhentian Island. The interview session was carried out either at restaurants during non-peak hours or at various tourist enclaves located throughout Perhentian Kecil and Perhentian Besar. Once these participants expressed their interest and willingness to take part in this study, the researcher conducted a short briefing about the present study, asked participants to sign the consent form, and sought their permission to record the audio. Most of the interviews lasted 45 minutes until 1 ½ hours for each session. The interview sessions were digitally recorded and notes were written down when necessary. The majority of the participants (n= 9) fall within the group of 20-30 years old, which can be considered adults. Another 11 participants fall within the groups of 30 years old and above. In terms of education, most of the participants (n=11) have undergraduate qualifications, followed by 8 postgraduate qualifications and a diploma. Occupation-wise, the 'professional' group formed the highest number among the participants, (n = 11), n= 4 worked in government, and n= 5 were students. A qualitative data analysis process was carried out, including transcribing the interviews, developing a data coding system, and linking codes for thematic analysis using NVIVO for social science software (Noble & Smith., 2013).

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Risk Factors

Mainly risk is the alternative way to reduce or mitigate, rather than fear or neophobia because they want to try Malaysian food. Altogether, five factors were identified from the narratives. These were a financial concern about low prices, environmental concerns, trust in local food handlers, health concerns, and *halal* risk. These factors highlight the complexity of consumer behaviour, as individuals weigh their desire for new experiences against potential risks associated with unfamiliar cuisines.

Furthermore, the interplay between perceived risks and emotional responses plays a crucial role in shaping consumers' willingness to engage with Malaysian cuisine. As identified in recent studies, positive emotions

can significantly enhance perceived control over unfamiliar food choices, thereby increasing variety-seeking behaviour among Western tourists. This suggests that while risk factors such as trust and health concerns are paramount, fostering an emotionally supportive environment—such as through engaging culinary experiences or community endorsements—can mitigate these apprehensions. Thus, local businesses may benefit from not only addressing safety and quality but also creating memorable dining experiences that evoke joy and curiosity, ultimately transforming potential neophobia into a more adventurous palate.

a) Financial affordability

The findings of this study highlight the significant role that food prices play in shaping tourists' willingness to try (WTT) local food, aligning with existing literature on consumer behavior.

“We just arrived but I just look for the food that is affordably priced”
[Participant 2, Female]

“When (going for) holidays, we will find something that is good, but we will see whether the price is affordable or not.” [Participant 5, Male]

Participants frequently compared food and accommodation prices to their home country and other destinations they had visited, revealing a tendency to seek affordable options during travel. This aligns with Choi, Lee, and Ok (2013), who found that consumers are more likely to purchase food that they perceive as offering value for money, particularly at affordable prices. In this study, many participants emphasized their preference for street food due to its lower cost, which increased their WTT local food, particularly when the price was perceived as cheap compared to their own countries.

Interestingly, participants' sensitivity to food prices was most apparent on Perhentian Island, where prices were perceived to be higher than in other parts of Malaysia, such as:

“Foods in Terengganu... I can say it was rather cheap, the same goes for Kelantan. But when (we) reach this island, it is really expensive! Really expensive! I don't know why. But after I tried the food here I know why the price is expensive. The quality of the food is so good. I think it worth buying the food.” [Participant 3, Female]

Despite initial reluctance due to the higher costs, some participants, after tasting the food, found that its quality justified the expense, mitigating their financial concerns. This resonates with the findings of Mak et al. (2013), who noted that tourists are often willing to try new foods if they perceive the quality and value as worth the price, even if the food is more expensive than expected. Furthermore, the role of financial constraints was evident, as participants noted that budget limitations influenced their food choices, with some bringing only a fixed amount of money to the island. This economic factor mirrors the conclusions of Choi, Lee, and Ok (2013), who found that price sensitivity is a key factor in consumers' food consumption decisions.

However, even with financial concerns, participants were still willing to try new foods when they believed the price reflected good value for money, indicating that financial limitations do not always inhibit culinary exploration. Instead, they highlight how price and perceived quality balance in shaping food-related decisions. As a result, tourists' WTT local food increases when they perceive the food as affordable and of good quality, especially when travelling on a budget. Thus, both the financial aspect and the perceived quality of food are critical factors in determining tourists' decisions to try local food.

b) Environmental sustainability

Environmental concerns play a significant role in shaping tourists' willingness to try (WTT) local food, particularly in the context of perceived environmental risks. Participants frequently highlighted concerns about the use of palm oil in local food preparation, associating it with negative environmental impacts. For instance, Participant 1 and 6 expressed their reluctance to try foods that use palm oil, citing worries about its impact on the environment including the potential loss of rainforests:

“In the food (they are cooking), mostly they used palm oil. So, I don’t know if you used it in the food. It will have an environmental impact. I will think about it if I want to buy fried foods.”
[Participant 1, Female]

“Malaysia loves palm oil, yes? (laugh nervously), yeah, not good for the rainforest”.
[Participant 6, Female]

This aligns with the findings of Choi, Lee, and Ok (2013), who also noted that consumers consider environmental factors such as food waste and water contamination when making food consumption decisions. These environmental concerns can decrease tourists’ WTT local foods if they perceive risks associated with unsustainable practices.

“With this good beach environment, it makes me want to try their foods. Don’t worry, I never think the street foods were bad either.” [Participant 5, Male]

“Maybe to try this I will look at the place. How it is. Or I will find places that sell this food and make sure the place is good too. Including their environment, and food quality” [Participant 6, Female]

Moreover, participants mentioned that a clean and beautiful environment enhanced their willingness to try new foods, as seen in the narratives of Participants 5 and 6, who equated a good environment with better food quality. This resonates with the study by Koc (2013), which found that the quality of food and drinks significantly influences tourists' holiday decisions. A pleasant environment not only enhances the food experience but also reduces perceived health risks, thus encouraging tourists to try unfamiliar foods. Clean surroundings, free from contamination, were viewed as essential in reducing tourists' perceived risks associated with local food.

However, this study's findings contrast with the work of Mynttinen et al. (2015), who found that environmental concerns did not play a role in Russian tourists' food consumption decisions. Instead, other factors such as the freshness of food, healthiness, and novelty were more influential. This suggests that environmental concerns may vary depending on cultural background and personal values. Therefore, while environmental factors significantly influence WTT local food for some tourists, other groups may prioritize different aspects, such as the freshness and novelty of food.

c) Health risk

A study by Mak et al., (2013) found preliminary evidence that health concerns are one of the factors that affect food consumption. It is the same with this present study that participants rationalised that health concerns are important elements of trying new food. Participants viewed trying unfamiliar food can giving them high health concerns because Malaysia is different from their origin country:

“Prefer healthy menu. Made sure my kids got enough nutrients even (on) holiday. Malaysia is different from our European diet. So, need to be careful.” [Participant 13, Male]

Participants mentioned about even here all food is new and they are not familiar, but they believe that Malaysian food is good and may not have a ‘bad’ effect on their health, as long as they exercise caution. Health concern appeared a common theme throughout this study since participants repeatedly highlighted this:

“The foods I eat, I (make) sure it does not have a bad effect on me. Look at their environment and quality. It must be good before I eat that food.” [Participant 2, Female]

“It’s just a fruit. Fruit is something that good for health. I am not scared to try it.”
[Participant 8, Female]

In this study findings showed participants can accept unfamiliar foods even if they are concerned about their health. They believe Malaysian foods is Malaysian food was healthy and they are willing to try them even though they do know about the risks that they face after they consume them. Different from the present study, Chang & Mak, (2011) found that tourists tended to be more likely to consume familiar food and maintain their healthy eating to avoid consuming any unhealthy food when they travel. Health concerns are the main risk factors in this study. Participants related food safety with health. For them, if the

food safety risks are high then the health concern is also high. A previous study from Mynttinen, (2015) can support the present study that participants in their study tend to perceive local food that is fresh and healthy.

4.2 Trust in Food Safety

Interestingly, the findings indicated the importance of trust in food safety among local food handlers as a key factor influencing tourists' willingness to try (WTT) local food. Participants expressed confidence in the hygiene and safety standards of Malaysian food, which significantly reduced their perceived risk of food poisoning. For instance:

“Their workers wear gloves when handling the food. I will never let my family eat at a bad place.”
[Participant 6, Female]

Participants noted that searching for hygienic food outlets is often challenging, but felt reassured about the cleanliness of Malaysian food establishments. This sentiment was echoed by other participants who highlighted their trust in the cleanliness and hygiene practices of local food handlers, particularly street vendors. The presence of visible hygiene practices, such as wearing gloves and proper food preparation, further increased participants' trust and willingness to try unfamiliar foods. This aligns with Choi, Lee, and Ok (2013), who identified hygiene as one of the highest risk factors in food consumption decisions, with consumers actively seeking out food vendors that meet high hygiene standards.

“Because the cooks here I considered they practice good hygiene and get fresh ingredients from the sea and mainland. So, It is not a problem at all.” [Participant 5, Male]

Moreover, participants in this study indicated that trust in the sourcing and handling of raw materials played a significant role in their WTT. Concerns over food safety not only influenced their choices but also affected their overall holiday experience, with some participants preferring restaurant dining over street food to mitigate potential risks. Trust in local food handlers, therefore, serves as a crucial determinant in reducing perceived risks and enhancing tourists' acceptance of local foods. This trust, as supported by previous studies, is significantly correlated with the tourists' likelihood of consuming local foods when they believe that the food producers and handlers adhere to strict safety and hygiene protocols. As such, food safety practices remain central to encouraging culinary exploration among tourists.

4.3 Online Reviews Information-seeking

The findings pinpoint the role of information seeking in tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods, a factor that has been consistently recognized in previous research. As noted by Huang et al. (2013) and Chang and Lu (2018), information-seeking serves as a key motivator for tourists to accept the risks associated with trying new foods. In this study, participants often mentioned that they based their decisions on reviews, recommendations from others, and prior research through blogs, books, or discussions, which helped them familiarize themselves with Malaysian cuisine. This aligns with the conclusions of Jonas and Mansfeld (2015), who identified information seeking as one of the main drivers of food choice among tourists.

“From blog, I have looked at review about foods. Their feedback overall said that Malaysian foods were good and so varieties. I looking forward to try as many as I can when I here.” [Participant 1, Female]

“The review from other people. Whether it okay or not. I will make a decision to eat or not.” [Participant 2, Female]

“But before I eat I scared actually their vegetables with other mix together. But when I see many people eat it and they said the taste was good. I okay if I try the food. I want to know whether it is true the food have a good taste.” [Participant 6, Female]

“Ya I think that. I also ask the worker about this. She said satay taste BBQ ya. It made me want to try. And it is good.” [Participant 10, Female]

Participants emphasized reviews on the variety and quality of Malaysian foods influenced their decision to try as many dishes as possible. Similarly, Participants mentioned that positive feedback from others

regarding the taste of a particular dish encouraged them to try it, despite initial concerns. These findings are supported by Pelchat and Pliner (1995), who demonstrated that information about the taste of unfamiliar foods reduces uncertainty and enhances willingness to try them. The familiarity gained from prior information not only bridges the gap between the unfamiliar and familiar but also reduces perceived risk.

This study also resonates with Choe and Cho (2011), who found that familiarity with food increases tourists' willingness to try it, as people who are more knowledgeable about the cuisine feel more confident in their decisions. However, while the context and location of these studies differ, the consistent finding is that information-seeking enhances familiarity, reduces perceived risks, and increases the likelihood of consuming unfamiliar foods. Thus, tourists who actively seek information about local foods are more likely to embrace culinary exploration during their travels.

4.4 Self-Motivation to Try New Food

In the findings, self-motivation plays a significant role in influencing tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods. Participants demonstrated an intrinsic interest in experiencing new foods, driven by curiosity and emotional excitement. This is consistent with Siegrist (2008), who emphasized that self-psychological factors are key in risk acceptance, as tourists are often motivated by their internal desire to explore new culinary experiences. For instance:

“If I want to try something new, I don’t care about others. What I think I should try by myself and see what will happen after that.” [Participant 1, Female]

“The foods (in) my experiences, influenced me and made me more adventurous to consume new food.” [Participant 3, Male]

Participants expressed their willingness to try new food without concern for others' opinions, highlighting the role of personal excitement in motivating food consumption. This aligns with the study by Choe and Kim (2018), which found that positive emotions, such as happiness and excitement, significantly influence tourists' attitudes toward trying local foods. Additionally, many participants expressed a strong desire to try Malaysian foods due to curiosity, as seen in Participant 4's interest in knowing more about unfamiliar foods. For example:

“But I like this fruit (durian). First, when I saw this I really wanted to know how it tastes and smell. Finally, I found it very unique and nice. I saw a lot of people eat. So, I curious about how the taste.” [Participant 5, Male]

These findings reflect Mak et al. (2013), who found that curiosity is one of the driving factors behind tourists' motivation to consume novel foods. Furthermore, food properties such as colour, appearance, and presentation played a crucial role in enhancing participants' self-motivation. As Participant 7 mentioned, brightly coloured dishes increased her excitement to try new foods, which is consistent with Martins and Pliner (2005), who identified that factors beyond taste—such as aroma, texture, and presentation—also contribute to food enjoyment and WTT unfamiliar foods. Our findings revealed tourists' motivation is not only linked to personal curiosity but also the symbolic meaning of the food, such as its representation of the local culture. Participants were more eager to try foods they perceived as unique or exotic, such as durian, which they had never encountered before. Thus, the combination of curiosity, emotional excitement, and the visual appeal of food significantly enhances tourists' self-motivation to try unfamiliar local foods.

Self-motivation plays a significant role in influencing tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods. Participants demonstrated an intrinsic interest in experiencing new foods, driven by curiosity and emotional excitement. For example:

“I must try it. Its colour seems amazing. Beautiful dishes.” [Participant 7, Female]

“Looking with my own eyes, the food looks more delicious with its aroma. Wow! Delicious!” [Participant 6, Female]

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instance, Participant 1 expressed her willingness to try new food without concern for others' opinions, highlighting the role of personal excitement in motivating food consumption. This aligns with the study by Choe and Kim (2018), which found that positive emotions, such as happiness and excitement, significantly influence tourists' attitudes toward trying local foods.

Many participants expressed a strong desire to try Malaysian foods due to curiosity, as seen in Participants' interest in knowing more about unfamiliar foods. This reflects Mak et al. (2013), who found that curiosity is one of the driving factors behind tourists' motivation to consume novel foods. Furthermore, food properties such as colour, appearance, and presentation played a crucial role in enhancing participants' self-motivation. As Participant 7 mentioned, brightly coloured dishes increased her excitement to try new foods, which is consistent with Martins and Pliner (2005), who identified that factors beyond taste—such as aroma, texture, and presentation—also contribute to food enjoyment and WTT unfamiliar foods. This study also shows that tourists' motivation is not only linked to personal curiosity but also the symbolic meaning of the food, such as its representation of the local culture. Participants were more eager to try foods they perceived as unique or exotic, such as durian, which they had never encountered before. Thus, the combination of curiosity, emotional excitement, and the visual appeal of food significantly enhances tourists' self-motivation to try unfamiliar local foods.

4.5 Memorable Experience in New Place

The findings of this study suggest that the desire to gain new experiences is a key motivator for tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods, supporting the conclusions of previous research. For example:

“If I don't try it, my holiday will not (be) complete. I'm here to explore new things and get as many as I can experience. So, no memorable experience that I can get in Malaysia if I didn't try food here.”
[Participant 7, Female]

“I'm here to explore new things here. So, if I didn't try local food that means I have not experienced Malaysia.” [Participant 20, Male]

As noted by Mak et al. (2013), authentic and novel experiences significantly influence tourists' local food consumption, as they view tasting unfamiliar foods as an opportunity to immerse themselves in the local culture. In this study, participants expressed that trying Malaysian food provided them with cultural insight and a memorable experience. For example, Participants emphasized that without trying local food, her holiday would feel incomplete, reflecting the strong link between food consumption and creating memorable travel experiences. Similarly, the limited time tourists have while traveling was another factor that increased their motivation to try new things, including local food, as suggested by Cohen and Avieli (2004). Participants, recognized the importance of using their travel time wisely to explore a wide range of experiences, including food:

“I love to get know new place, culture, food, environment, also new people in different countries. I think every country have their own uniqueness, attractiveness. I only have a limited time to travel here. Need to use this time to experience a lot of thing.” [Participant 15, Male]

“When we come to travel at other countries that what we need to find, a new thing. Try and experience it. Malaysia I tried such interesting fruit. Has a strong but it taste unique. I can't find it at others country.”
[Participant 12, Female]

These quotes further emphasized the importance of peak experiences in travel (Wang and Quang, 2004). For Participant 12, trying exotic fruit like durian was considered a unique cultural experience that could not be replicated in other countries, further highlighting the significance of local food in enhancing tourists' overall experience.

This aligns with the findings of Chang et al. (2011), who observed that tourists often associate eating unfamiliar foods with achieving peak travel experiences, thus driving their WTT new foods. Additionally, Chang and Lu (2018) suggested that tourists' pursuit of new experiences during travel stimulates their openness to try unfamiliar foods. Therefore, tourists with a high interest in gaining new experiences are

more inclined to try local foods, viewing food consumption as an integral part of their overall travel adventure.

4.6 Positive Service-Encounter

Earlier investigations conducted by DiPietro and Campbell (2014) ascertained that the service encounter within a particular environment significantly influences consumer perceptions regarding local cuisine, as it affects consumers' emotions and sensations of pleasure when the restaurant provides exemplary service, consequently impacting their propensity to return to the establishment. Participants articulated favourable responses regarding their interactions with individuals in Malaysia. Emotions such as confusion or curiosity were manifested when participants expressed a desire to sample unfamiliar foods. Participants highlighted the positive attitudes and behaviours exhibited by servers at local dining establishments, which elicited favourable emotional responses. Participant 5 conveyed feeling comforted to an experience where the servers were notably helpful and amiable during the order-taking process:

“They are good. Even I asked them a lot about the menu. They still can smile and explain it one by one. Seeing their effort to explain to me, made me want to try their foods. They know how to comfort their customers. So, nice.” [Participant 5, Female]

The findings further indicate that the service provided by sellers or waitstaff at restaurants considerably affects tourists' decisions regarding the consumption of local foods. This assertion is corroborated by previous research which posits that service, encompassing interactions among patrons and the service rendered by employees, significantly influences consumer decision-making processes. Participants remarked on the efficiency of food service, emphasizing the time-saving aspect. They provided positive feedback regarding the Malaysian food service experience, as it fostered a sense of comfort:

“We don't need to wait long for food. For some foods, 15 minutes they are ready to be served. They (servers) keep talking to us while waiting for food. It made me feel so comfortable with them like we already know before.” [Participant 15, Male]

“I feel really good when I come to their restaurants. The waiters welcomed us and always smiled. The environment of the restaurant with interesting colours will make people who come feel calm. I love it. I will come again next time.” [Participant 20, Male]

Moreover, participants further discussed the ambience of the restaurant, perceiving it as integral to their dining experience. The relaxed and informal beach restaurant atmosphere facilitated positive service encounters between the food establishment and consumers. Prior research has also highlighted that service interactions serve as a neutral component that influences customers' decisions to patronize restaurants with favourable environments, thereby enhancing their comfort and confidence in the dining setting (DiPietro and Campbell, 2014).

4.7 Trust in Other People

Research conducted by Siegrist (2008) posited that trust constitutes a significant determinant that directly impacts the consumption of novel food items. In light of this investigation, participants articulated how trust could affect their food acceptance. For instance, Participant 2 indicated her confidence in street food, expressing a desire to sample such cuisine. This response indicated her trust in the food:

“Perhaps individuals perceive street food as subpar and unhealthy. However, in my case, I am not apprehensive; I have confidence and am not afraid to try that food.” [Participant 2, Female]

“Perhaps I can glean some insights from the internet regarding what others have articulated about it. Subsequently, I will determine whether I can partake or not. Yes, I trust them. How could they possibly deceive me? I am aware the fruit is nice.” [Participant 8, Female]

Moreover, the evaluations that tourists encounter on the internet, including blogs or government websites, play a crucial role in their willingness to consume unfamiliar foods, thereby enhancing their trust in local cuisine. Participant 8 expressed faith in the testimonials provided by previous consumers who had experienced Malaysian food. The information she discovered regarding the cuisine motivated her to

embrace any potential risks associated with it. The findings of this study align with previous research, wherein participants were queried about their selection criteria for restaurants or new foods, and the predominant response indicated that trust is a key influencing factor (Huang et al., 2013). Drawing from the interviews, participants underscored the significance of their trust in vendors:

“I trust the restaurants. They have necessary knowledge to ensure the safety of their food. They are certainly aware of what could adversely affect their guests. Yes, trust is essential for me.” [Participant 9, Female]

“The vendor assured me of its superior taste. This assurance further motivated me to explore it. It has not disappointed me whatsoever. I also trust that the vendor has never sold food that could cause illness. Correct.” [Participant 11, Female]

Previous studies indicate that trust in individuals managing risks is correlated with risk acceptance, serving as a principal factor influencing such acceptance (Huang et al., 2013). Furthermore, the study conducted by Siegrist (2008) asserted that trust exerts an influence on risk-benefit perceptions, thereby impacting individuals' risk acceptance. Correspondingly, the present study reveals that tourists place their trust in food handlers and fellow tourists, particularly when consuming unfamiliar foods in contexts where perceived risk is elevated. This finding corroborates the research conducted by Huang et al. (2013) and Siegrist (2008), demonstrating that participants exhibited a greater willingness to try unfamiliar foods when they felt trust in those handling the food, as well as in the food handlers themselves. Consequently, tourists who possess a high degree of trust in others are likely to enhance their willingness to try local foods.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study identifies critical factors influencing tourists' willingness to try (WTT) unfamiliar local foods, with significant implications for the tourism industry, restaurants, tour operators, and local authorities. Financial, environmental, and health risks are key concerns for tourists, and ensuring affordable, sustainable, and safe food offerings can enhance local food tourism. Crucially, our findings showed trust to act as a bridge between familiar food and unfamiliar local foods. In trust theory, Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone, (1998) show that trust is used to reduce conflicts, indicating that trust mitigates Europeans perceived risks and a more willingness to try when trust with others is established. Trust in local food handlers and the provision of positive, reliable information about food safety and quality further strengthens tourists' confidence, benefiting restaurants by attracting more customers. Self-motivation and curiosity, driven by the desire for new experiences, are strong motivators for tourists to explore local cuisine, making food a key component of cultural tourism. Tour operators can leverage these insights by incorporating food experiences into their travel packages, catering to tourists' desire for authentic, memorable encounters. Positive service encounters and a well-maintained servicescape also foster customer satisfaction, encouraging repeat visits and enhancing the overall dining experience. Local authorities play a vital role in supporting the tourism sector by promoting food safety standards and encouraging sustainable practices, which attract environmentally conscious travellers. By addressing these factors, stakeholders can optimize food tourism experiences, ultimately boosting the region's reputation and economic growth. This holistic approach underscores the importance of food in shaping a successful tourism strategy.

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