



**STAGING OF DINING ELEMENTS IN TRADITIONAL  
MALAY RESTAURANTS IN THE KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA**

**By**

**NUR ATIQA BINTI LOKMAN**

**Thesis is submitted to the School of Graduate studies,  
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in fulfilment of the requirement for the  
Degree of Master in Food Service Management**

**January 2024**

**FSTM 2024 1**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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**January, 2024**

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Staging the true cultural dining experience in an ethnic restaurant is crucial to ensure customer satisfaction, revisit intention and cultural preservation. However, compared to other ethnic restaurants with lucid elements projections, Malay restaurants have a blurry and weak identity presentation. This situation prevents diners from identifying and immersing themselves in a true Malay dining experience. Furthermore, there are no guidelines set by the government or academic findings for the restaurants to refer to when staging Malay heritage dining. As such, this study aims to explore and understand the dining elements that need to be staged inside traditional Malay restaurants through these three main questions: 1) what are the fundamental elements of a traditional Malay restaurant?; 2) how can the elements give meaning and value to the staging of the traditional Malay theme?; and 3) what are the challenges faced by traditional Malay restaurants in presenting the Malay identity?. A qualitative study was employed in this study. A total of nine informants were interviewed, five of them from traditional Malay restaurants'

management and the remaining four were interior designers. Data were primarily gathered through an in-depth, semi-structured interview and supported by participatory observation and visual material of the restaurants' interior and exterior. The data were further analysed through thematic analysis using Nvivo Software. Codes and categories were formed to develop the main themes to answer the research questions.

The study revealed that, for a restaurant to truly stage the Malay identity inside the restaurant settings, it should have the following five elements which are; 1) serving traditional Malay cuisine; 2) implementing classical concepts; 3) strengthening the Malay identity in design and décor; 4) fostering a cultural atmosphere; and 5) promoting local hospitality and services. In the second step to truly immersed with the elements, restaurateurs should learn and know about the value and meaning of each of the elements presented, which are; 1) reminiscence of Malay culture; 2) resemblance of Malay culture; and 3) educating and elevating the dining experience. In staging elements, restaurateurs experienced some challenges, namely; 1) misconceptions surrounding the concept; and 2) challenges in design and decoration. In conclusion, the findings of this study can help restaurant managers to stage Malay cultural dining experiences to expose and educate diners about the value and beauty of Malay culture, art, and heritage. The valuable findings would also aid authorities in projecting their marketing and use traditional restaurants as a focal point of their strategy.

**Keywords:** authentic, cultural dining experience, ethnic restaurant, Malay, traditional restaurant.

**SDG:** GOAL 4: Sustainable Cities and Communities



Abstrak tesis yang dibentangkan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
bagi memenuhi keperluan ijazah Master Sains

**PERSEMBAHAN ELEMEN-ELEMEN JAMUAN DI RESTORAN TRADISI  
MELAYU DI KAWASAN LEMBAH KLANG, MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Persembahan budaya sebenar ketika menjamu selera di sesebuah restoran etnik amat perlu untuk dititikberatkan bagi memastikan kepuasan hati pelanggan, menyemai niat untuk mengulang ziarah dan memelihara budaya. Namun, berbanding restoran-restoran etnik lain yang mempunyai penampilan elemen-elemen yang jelas, restoran-restoran Melayu pula mempunyai persembahan identiti yang tidak jelas dan lemah. Situasi ini menghalang para penjamu selera daripada mengenal pasti dan menyelami pengalaman sebenar ketika menjamu selera. Selanjutnya, tiada garis panduan yang ditetapkan oleh pihak kerajaan atau dapatan akademik untuk dirujuk oleh restoran-restoran Melayu ini dalam hal berkenaan persembahan makanan warisan Melayu. Oleh yang demikian, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik dan memahami elemen-elemen makan yang perlu dipersembahkan di dalam restoran-restoran Melayu tradisional melalui tiga persoalan utama yang berikut: 1) Apakah elemen-elemen teras bagi sesebuah restoran tradisi Melayu?; 2) Bagaimanakah elemen-elemen tersebut memberikan makna dan nilai kepada persembahan

tema tradisi Melayu?; dan 3) Apakah cabaran-cabaran yang dihadapi oleh restoran-restoran tradisi Melayu dalam mempersembahkan identiti Melayu? Satu kajian kualitatif telah dijalankan dalam kajian ini. Seramai sembilan orang pemberi maklumat telah ditemuramah; lima orang daripada mereka adalah daripada pihak pengurusan restoran-restoran tradisi Melayu, manakala empat orang yang lain pula ialah pereka bentuk dalaman. Data dikumpul terutamanya melalui temuduga mendalam semistruktur dan disokong oleh pemerhatian peserta dan bahan visual terhadap reka bentuk dalaman dan luaran restoran-restoran tersebut. Data tersebut selanjutnya dianalisis melalui kaedah analisis tematik dengan menggunakan perisian Nvivo. Kod-kod dan kategori-kategori dibentuk untuk membina tema-tema utama bagi menjawab persoalan-persoalan penyelidikan.

Kajian ini mendedahkan dapatan bahawa, untuk sesebuah restoran yang benar-benar mempersembahkan identiti Melayu di dalam tetapan restoran tersebut, ia perlu memiliki kelima-lima elemen yang berikut: 1) menghidangkan juadah tradisi Melayu; 2) menerapkan konsep-konsep klasik; 3) memperkukuh identiti Melayu pada reka bentuk dan dekorasi; 4) menyemaikan suasana berbudaya; dan 5) mempromosikan layanan dan perkhidmatan tempatan. Dalam langkah kedua untuk benar-benar menyulam elemen-elemen tersebut, para pemilik restoran perlu mempelajari dan mengetahui nilai dan makna bagi setiap elemen yang dipersembahkan, iaitu 1) membangkitkan kenangan terhadap budaya Melayu; 2) memberikan kesamaan dengan budaya Melayu; dan 3) mendidik dan membangkitkan pengalaman menjamu selera. Dalam elemen-elemen persembahan, para pemilik restoran mengalami beberapa

cabaran, iaitu 1) salah faham mengenai konsep dan 2) cabaran berkenaan reka bentuk dan dekorasi. Kesimpulannya, dapatan-dapatan daripada kajian ini boleh membantu para pengurus restoran untuk mempersembahkan pengalaman menjamu selera menurut budaya Melayu untuk memberikan pendedahan dan mendidik para penjamu selera berkenaan nilai dan keindahan budaya, seni dan warisan Melayu. Dapatan-dapatan yang bernilai ini turut boleh membantu pihak berkuasa dalam melancarkan usaha pemasaran mereka dan menggunakan restoran-restoran tradisi ini sebagai titik fokus yang penting dalam strategi mereka.

**Kata kunci:** autentik, pengalaman menjamu selera mengikut budaya, restoran etnik, Melayu, restoran tradisi.

**SDG:** *GOAL 4: Sustainable Cities and Communities*



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                        | Page |
|------------------------|------|
| <b>ABSTRACT</b>        | i    |
| <b>ABSTRAK</b>         | iv   |
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b> | vii  |
| <b>APPROVAL</b>        | viii |
| <b>DECLARATION</b>     | x    |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> | xv   |
| <b>LIST OF TABLES</b>  | xvi  |

## CHAPTER

|          |                                                                                      |           |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                                                                  | <b>1</b>  |
|          | 1.1 Background of the Study                                                          | 1         |
|          | 1.2 Problem Statement                                                                | 6         |
|          | 1.3 Research Questions                                                               | 8         |
|          | 1.4 Research Objectives                                                              | 9         |
|          | 1.5 Significance of Study                                                            | 9         |
|          | 1.5.1 Theoretical                                                                    | 10        |
|          | 1.5.2 Practical                                                                      | 11        |
|          | 1.6 Scope of Study                                                                   | 12        |
|          | 1.7 Definitions of Terms                                                             | 12        |
|          | 1.8 Chapter Summary                                                                  | 14        |
| <b>2</b> | <b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>                                                             | <b>15</b> |
|          | 2.1 The Malay Descendants                                                            | 15        |
|          | 2.1.1 Malay Community in Malaysia                                                    | 15        |
|          | 2.1.2 Malay Culture Heritage                                                         | 16        |
|          | 2.1.3 Malay Traditional Cuisines                                                     | 18        |
|          | 2.2 The Food Service Industry in Malaysia                                            | 19        |
|          | 2.2.1 Ethnic Restaurant in Malaysia                                                  | 20        |
|          | 2.3 Ethnic Restaurants' Challenges in Presenting<br>and Preserving Cultural Identity | 21        |
|          | 2.4 Restaurant's Dining-scale                                                        | 24        |
|          | 2.5 Authenticity                                                                     | 30        |
|          | 2.5.1 Object Authenticity                                                            | 31        |
|          | 2.5.2 Restaurant's Authenticity                                                      | 33        |
|          | 2.5.3 Local Food's Authenticity                                                      | 34        |
|          | 2.6 Dinescape Model                                                                  | 35        |
|          | 2.7 Sensory Marketing Framework                                                      | 39        |
|          | 2.8 Theoretical Framework                                                            | 40        |
|          | 2.9 Chapter Summary                                                                  | 43        |

|          |                                                        |           |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>3</b> | <b>METHODOLOGY</b>                                     | <b>44</b> |
| 3.1      | Qualitative Research Method                            | 44        |
| 3.2      | Case Study Approach                                    | 45        |
| 3.3      | Method of Data Collection                              | 46        |
| 3.3.1    | In-depth interview                                     | 47        |
| 3.3.2    | Participatory Observation                              | 49        |
| 3.3.3    | Visual material                                        | 50        |
| 3.3.4    | Researcher as Instruments                              | 51        |
| 3.4      | Activities Before Entering the Field                   | 52        |
| 3.4.1    | Sampling Methods                                       | 53        |
| 3.4.2    | Criteria for Informant Selection                       | 54        |
| 3.4.3    | Sample Size                                            | 54        |
| 3.4.4    | Sampling Location                                      | 56        |
| 3.5      | Activities in the Fieldwork: Data Collection Procedure | 58        |
| 3.5.1    | Pilot Study and Actual Study                           | 58        |
| 3.5.2    | Semi-structured Interview                              | 61        |
| 3.5.3    | Interview Protocol and Observation Protocol            | 62        |
| 3.5.4    | Audio Voice Recorder                                   | 63        |
| 3.5.5    | Ethics in Research                                     | 64        |
| 3.5.6    | Transcription of Interview                             | 65        |
| 3.5.7    | Analysing the Interview                                | 66        |
| 3.6      | Validation and Reliability                             | 70        |
| 3.6.1    | Qualitative Validity                                   | 70        |
| 3.6.2    | Qualitative Reliability                                | 72        |
| 3.7      | Chapter Summary                                        | 72        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b>                          | <b>73</b> |
| 4.1      | Research Question 1                                    |           |
| 4.1.1    | Serving Traditional Malay Cuisine                      | 76        |
| 4.1.2    | Implementing Classical Concepts                        | 86        |
| 4.1.3    | Strengthening the Malay Identity in Design and Décor   | 90        |
| 4.1.4    | Fostering a Cultural Atmosphere                        | 101       |
| 4.1.5    | Promoting Local Hospitality and Services               | 110       |
| 4.2      | Research Question 2                                    |           |
| 4.2.1    | Reminiscing Malay Culture                              | 115       |
| 4.2.2    | Resembling the Culture                                 | 123       |
| 4.2.3    | Enlightening the Dining Experience                     | 129       |
| 4.3      | Research Question 3                                    |           |
| 4.3.1    | Misconceptions Surrounding the Concept                 | 138       |
| 4.3.2    | Dilemmas in Design and Decoration                      | 144       |
| 4.4      | Chapter Summary                                        | 150       |

|          |                                                                                                    |            |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>5</b> | <b>SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS,<br/>LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE<br/>INDUSTRY</b> | <b>152</b> |
| 5.1      | Summary of the Study                                                                               | 152        |
| 5.2      | Conclusion                                                                                         | 155        |
| 5.3      | Implication                                                                                        | 158        |
| 5.4      | Limitations of the Study and Future Works                                                          | 160        |
| 5.5      | Recommendations for the Industry                                                                   | 162        |
| 5.6      | Summary of the Chapter                                                                             | 163        |
|          | <b>REFERENCES</b>                                                                                  | <b>164</b> |
|          | <b>APPENDICES</b>                                                                                  | <b>182</b> |
|          | <b>BIODATA OF THE STUDENT</b>                                                                      | <b>201</b> |
|          | <b>PUBLICATION</b>                                                                                 | <b>202</b> |



## LIST OF TABLES

| Table |                                                    | Page |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------|------|
| 2.1   | Aspect and Analytics Approaches of Authenticity    | 31   |
| 3.1   | Date of Interview and Observation for Pilot study  | 60   |
| 3.2   | Date of Interview and Observation for Actual Study | 60   |
| 4.1   | Informant Profiles                                 | 74   |
| 4.2   | Data Saturation                                    | 74   |



## LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure |                                                                                   | Page |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| 1.1    | Number of Establishment MSME's in 2022                                            | 2    |
| 2.1    | Model Characterizing the Nature of the Relationships that Define Authenticity     | 33   |
| 2.2    | Five Elements of Sensory Marketing                                                | 40   |
| 2.3    | Traditional Malay Restaurant's Framework                                          | 42   |
| 3.1    | Map of Klang Valley Area                                                          | 57   |
| 3.2    | Flow Chart of Data Analysis Process Using Nvivo Software                          | 68   |
| 3.3    | Screenshots of Data in Nvivo Software                                             | 69   |
| 3.4    | Screenshots of Theme in Nvivo Software                                            | 69   |
| 4.1    | Traditional Malay Sambal Served at R4's Restaurants                               | 77   |
| 4.2    | Field Notes about Food Presentation for R4's Restaurant                           | 78   |
| 4.3    | Traditional Malay and Javanese Foods Served at R5's restaurants                   | 82   |
| 4.4    | R4's Uses the Banana Leaves to Serve the Foods                                    | 84   |
| 4.5    | The Use of Malay Name for R1's Restaurant                                         | 88   |
| 4.6    | The Use of Malay Language in the Menu and the Restaurant Name for R5's Restaurant | 89   |
| 4.7    | Environment that Portrays <i>Kampung</i> Scenery in R3's Restaurant               | 91   |
| 4.8    | Palace Theming inside R2's Restaurant                                             | 91   |
| 4.9    | The "Aisle" to R4's Restaurant                                                    | 95   |
| 4.10   | The Existence of Bamboo Fence in R1's Restaurant                                  | 95   |
| 4.11   | The Pattern Carved on Door in R2's Restaurant                                     | 98   |
| 4.12   | DIY Lamps inside R5's Restaurant                                                  | 100  |
| 4.13   | The Dancers from R3's Restaurant                                                  | 102  |
| 4.14   | R2's Restaurant Primarily Features Brown Tones                                    | 106  |
| 4.15   | R4's Restaurant Incorporates Refreshing Green Hues.                               | 107  |
| 4.16   | Staff at R5's Restaurant Elegantly Adorned in <i>Batik</i> Cloth Attire           | 111  |
| 4.17   | The Fundamental Elements in Traditional Malay Restaurant                          | 114  |
| 4.18   | R5's Restaurant Choose Brown as their Signature Colour                            | 116  |
| 4.19   | Field Notes about Environment in R5's Restaurant                                  | 117  |
| 4.20   | Old Items from Ancestors Placed as Decor in R1's Restaurants                      | 121  |

|      |                                                                         |     |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 4.21 | The Paintings that Convey Malay Identity in R5's Restaurant             | 123 |
| 4.22 | R3's Restaurant Hang <i>Songket</i> with a Board as Their Decor         | 124 |
| 4.23 | R5's Restaurant has Patterned Floor with Malay Design                   | 125 |
| 4.24 | Part of Western Concept in R4's Restaurant                              | 127 |
| 4.25 | Part of Chinese Concept in R4's Restaurant                              | 127 |
| 4.26 | Educational Section in the R1's Restaurant                              | 135 |
| 4.27 | Educational Section in the R5's Restaurant                              | 135 |
| 4.28 | The Value and Meaning of the Elements in Traditional Malay Restaurant   | 137 |
| 4.29 | The Challenges in Staging Malay Culture in Traditional Malay Restaurant | 150 |





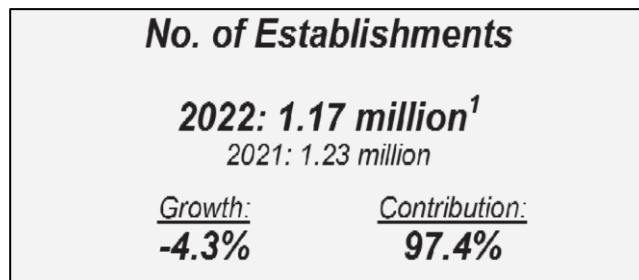
## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter comprises seven sections. The first section outlines the background of the research, while the second section delves into the problem statement and continues with the objectives, and research questions. Finally, the sixth section explores the significance of the study and the chapter concludes with operational definitions.

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The food service industry is one of the largest and fastest growing sectors in the world, and it has been identified as one of the key components of the hospitality industry that contributes significantly to Malaysia's revenue (Othman et al., 2018). However, according to the data from the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperative (MEDAC), 32,469 small and medium enterprises (SMEs), including restaurants, had been reported either closed or ceased operations since the beginning of the MCO (Adam, 2020). The result can be seen in Figure 1.1, where the number of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (MSME) establishments is decreasing in 2022 as compared to 2021 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).



**Figure 1.1: Number of Establishment MSME's in 2022**  
(Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023)

As Malays constitute the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, and with a substantial presence of SME restaurants in the market, this particular business sector is also affected. The Malay restaurants are currently facing significant risks, as their sustainability was already precarious prior to the occurrence of the pandemic (Abdullah & Isa, 2020). The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, which has demonstrated the remarkable popularity and success of various ethnic restaurants, including Mamak restaurants (Indian Muslim restaurants), Indian restaurants, and Chinese restaurants (Othman et al., 2018; Othman et al., 2013). Furthermore, past study has investigated different dimensions of the difficulties encountered by Malay restaurants, including managerial and organisational factors (Abdullah & Isa, 2020) as well as customers' experiences and service quality (Othman et al., 2013).

However, there is a lack of research exploring the use of theming within ethnic restaurants as a business strategy to increase profits and customer satisfaction while preserving cultural heritage. Previous research has established that theming is a crucial aspect of restaurant operations and often serves as a marketing strategy to differentiate from competitors (Wood &

Muñoz, 2007). According to Åstrøm (2020), theming transforms services into experiences by carefully designing and arranging the environment to make it visually appealing and memorable for customers. In some themed restaurants, the theme encompasses interior and exterior design. Conversely, in ethnic-themed restaurants, the priority is placed on the food, while the interior and exterior design enhances the overall surrounding of the restaurant (Sørensen et al., 2020).

Despite the distinctiveness of Malay heritage, traditional Malay restaurants have undergone fusion and significant influence from multiple ethnic groups. As stated by Othman (2007), many Malay restaurants serve a variety of Asian and other ethnic cuisines, including Malay, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, and Thai. Jalis (2008) noted that these restaurants offer diverse menus to accommodate the preferences of a wide array of ethnicities and varying food choices within the country. Unfortunately, this phenomenon blunts Malay identity representation and loses the main attractions of what an ethnic restaurant should become. For many people, ethnic-themed restaurants are their first or only contact with a foreign culture, giving them a chance to try a country's food and people for the first time and form an opinion about them (Mkono, 2012).

On the other hand, the role of atmospherics, environmental factors, and food quality in ethnic restaurants has been a topic of interest in recent studies. These findings are in line with previous studies that have established the impact of atmospherics on customers' behaviours and revisit intentions in

various ethnic restaurants, such as Mamak, Chinese, and Korean restaurants (Ha & Jang, 2010; Jalis et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2011; Pratminingsih et al., 2018). Furthermore, the interior décor and ambience also play a crucial role in showcasing the theme and identity of the ethnicity, which can significantly impact diners' perceptions and evaluations of the restaurant (Ishak et al., 2018; Tsai & Lu, 2012). Therefore, emphasising the décor element will help ethnic restaurants stage their dining area effectively and preserve their ethnic identity.

Several scales and frameworks have been developed to assess the various elements that contribute to customer satisfaction and revisit intentions in restaurants, including ATMOSPHERIC, SERVICESCAPE, SERVQUAL, DINESERV, TANGSERVE, and DINEX (Antun et al., 2010; Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1973; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Raajpoot, 2002; Stevens et al., 1995). These frameworks were developed through quantitative research and generally applied to middle-to-upscale restaurants. However, none of them was specifically designed for ethnic restaurants. The most pertinent framework that addresses the unique requirements of ethnic restaurants is the DINESCAPE scale, which was formulated by Ryu and Jang (2008). This scale considers six crucial elements - facility aesthetics, lighting, ambience, layout, table setting, and service staff - that play a significant role in defining the identity of an ethnic restaurant.

Notwithstanding, with modernization, originality has been transformed or diluted in its presentation. For example, it can be observed using *wayang kulit* character paintings to evoke a Malay-Indonesian theme instead of using

physical shadow puppets or *batik* cloth (Ishak et al., 2017). The same study also revealed that the restaurant owner used yellow and grey in the dining area, representing the heritage colour (yellow keraton) while incorporating a touch of modernity (grey). However, there needs to be more clarity in previous research on how the evolution of Malay restaurants still embodies cultural identity while accommodating the fast-paced trends in the contemporary era. The question remains whether the modified presentation still represents the true heritage of ethnicity or if it is a method of preservation that caters to modernization and is accepted by customer preferences.

It is imperative to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the current practices of the traditional Malay restaurant sector to address the dilution or modernisation of the Malay ethnic identity. Furthermore, developing guidelines for industry practitioners to refer to is crucial as a means to preserve the traditional Malay restaurant in the food service industry (Jacob & Kuruvilla, 2010). This study aims to explore the challenges traditional Malay restaurant owners face in maintaining their cultural identity in the dining experience and provide a set of guidelines for their preservation. The successful establishment of these restaurants will not only secure their survival but also serve as a bridge between the tourism industry and those who offer a combination of food and cultural identity to meet the demands of tourists (Levitt, 2018; Jang, 2017; Sørensen et al., 2020).

## 1.2 Problem Statement

According to Chen et al. (2019), ethnic restaurants offer distinctive dining experiences that aim to authentically represent a particular culture. Consequently, originality plays a pivotal role in these establishments, encompassing various aspects such as ambiance, cuisine, and service quality (Jang et al., 2011; Kim & Jang, 2016; Liu, 2008). For instance, the Thai government's Thai Select program, initiated in 2006, strives to enhance the portrayal of Thai culture in overseas restaurants by focusing on interior design, ambiance, and culinary offerings (Berno et al., 2019). This concerted effort has earned Thai restaurants recognition, placing 13th out of 20 cities for the yearly Travellers' Choice Awards by TripAdvisor (The Beat Asia, February 13th, 2023). Furthermore, Taste Atlas ranked Thailand as the 30th best overall culinary destination globally, based on public votes (Taste Atlas, 2022). These accolades underscore the significance of originality in effectively conveying the true essence of a specific ethnicity, aligning with the desired qualities and characteristics of an authentic ethnic restaurant.

Despite the importance of preserving cultural authenticity, the portrayal of Malay culture in restaurants needs to be improved. It has been emphasised that the decor, menu, and name of an ethnic restaurant should all reflect the ethnicity of the cuisine (Yoshino, 2010). However, the menu in many Malay restaurants lacks originality and often incorporates elements from other ethnic groups, such as Indians, Thais, Javanese, Sumatran, Chinese, and Arabs (Yoshino, 2010). Traditional dining etiquette is also being neglected in the dining environment of Malay restaurants (Hamzah et al., 2013). Compounding

the situation, the dominance of local millennials as primary consumers in contemporary business settings has significantly influenced the evolution of trendy and hipster restaurants, thereby reshaping the landscape of the Malaysian food service industry (Shaare & Muhammad, 2018). This highlights the need for increased awareness and preservation of cultural heritage to prevent the "fading away" of ethnic identity (Azmi & Ismail, 2016).

Concerning the above notion, another issue arises when traditional Malay restaurants lack guidelines for curating cultural dining experiences. Such guidelines are necessary for the ability of these restaurants to convey their cultural identity. To address this issue, previous scholars have listed the essential attributes of other ethnic restaurants (Alansari, 2016; Jalis et al., 2018). For instance, Jalis et al. (2018) identified eight critical elements of Mamak restaurants: environment/ atmosphere, seating capacity, menu, employees, price, operating hours, name, and location. However, while previous studies have explored various aspects of food culture, food quality, food safety, food tourism, food heritage, and food consumption (Hashim et al., 2019; Henderson, 2016; Tsai & Wang, 2017; Zain et al., 2018), they do not encompass the broader scope of cultural experiences that ethnic restaurants can offer beyond food.

Finally, a gap in methodology was also identified in previous studies, which primarily employed a quantitative approach (Băltescu & Boşcor, 2016; Hendriyani, 2018; Jang & Ha, 2014; Min & Lee, 2014). To address this issue, this study employs a qualitative approach, in line with the recommendation of



Chatzopoulou (2018) and the insights from previous studies (Brown, 2013; Khalifa, 2015; Rickly-Boyd, 2013), which encouraged the use of qualitative methods to explore the originality of ethnic restaurants. The in-depth nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) makes it appropriate for examining the dining elements in traditional Malay restaurants. It allows the researcher to understand how these elements are portrayed and staged to reflect the essence of Malayness. This research aims to investigate the role of cultural elements in managing the identity of traditional Malay restaurants and to examine the challenges faced by traditional Malay restaurant owners in showcasing their cultural heritage.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the key components that define traditional Malay restaurants and to gain deep insights into the significant challenges encountered by restaurant owners or managers in effectively representing and preserving the cultural identity of the Malay community within their establishments. Hence, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the fundamental elements of a traditional Malay restaurant?
2. How can the elements give meaning and value to the staging of the Malay traditional theme?
3. What are the challenges faced by traditional Malay restaurants in presenting the Malay identity?



#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study is to examine the essential components of traditional Malay restaurants and to understand the challenges faced by the owners or managers in presenting the cultural identity of Malay within the restaurant. The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To explore the fundamental elements of a traditional Malay restaurant
2. To identify the roles of each element in giving meaning and value through the Malay traditional theme.
3. To discover the problems for traditional Malay restaurants when it comes to showing their Malay identity in the restaurants.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The present study examines the identity representation of traditional Malay restaurants by exploring the dining elements employed by these establishments within the Klang Valley region. This research seeks to identify the significance and value of these cultural elements in portraying Malay identity in restaurants. The findings of this study could be utilised by future or current owners of traditional Malay restaurants to ensure that they incorporate the appropriate cultural elements in their establishments. The study also has the potential to inform regulatory bodies, such as the Department of National Heritage, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC), and Tourism Malaysia, in their evaluations of the effectiveness of these strategies in preserving the cultural heritage of traditional Malay restaurants. The

significance of this study is multi-faceted and will be further discussed in the following sections.

### **1.5.1 Theoretical**

This research significantly contributes to the theoretical landscape of staging Malay restaurants in several ways. Firstly, it addresses the need to understand and identify the cultural identity of traditional Malay restaurants. In the contemporary food industry, restaurants must go beyond just offering quality food to retain their reputation, as consumers are becoming increasingly discerning with rising food prices (Marinkovic et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the findings of this study can serve as a foundation for future research, potentially extending into a broader scope. For instance, it paves the way for investigating the cultural identity of various other ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. Therefore, this study has the potential to deepen comprehension regarding of the dynamics of a country's diverse culinary landscape.

Additionally, from the theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in the field of restaurant management and design, specifically within the Malaysian context. By concentrating on the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia, this study uncovered a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural and design elements intersect in shaping the dining experience.

This enriches the theoretical foundation on the complexity of ethnic restaurants and their role in fostering cultural preservation and identity in diverse societies.

### 1.5.2 Practical

In light of the saturation of various types of restaurants in Malaysia, such as fast food, full-service, themed, and ethnic restaurants, each establishment must adopt strategies to maintain relevance and sustainability within the industry. As the dining environment has been demonstrated to significantly impact customers' emotions and shape their post-dining behaviour intentions (Liu, 2008), carefully considering the selection and portrayal of Malay elements within the restaurant is of managerial significance. This can not only enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of the establishment but also increase customer satisfaction and encourage return visits. Furthermore, if the Malay cultural theme is effectively staged, the restaurant can serve as a platform to educate and expose customers to the unique elements of the Malay culture.

To add, the present study has the potential to bring benefits to relevant authorities such as MOTAC, Tourism Malaysia, and travel agencies. These entities can leverage the study's findings to identify traditional Malay restaurants as cultural ambassadors and tourism hotspots, thereby increasing profits for the food and beverage (F&B) and tourism industries. Furthermore, the exploitation of traditional Malay restaurants as cultural centres has the potential to impact society positively. This is because the study aims to define the concept of an authentic ethnic restaurant clearly and to preserve the cultural identity of the Malay ethnic group. The study also seeks to promote "edu-dining," where traditional Malay restaurants serve not only as a place to eat but also as a place to learn about the culture.

## **1.6 Scope of Study**

The primary objective of this study is to examine the key elements of traditional Malay restaurants. This will be achieved by investigating the difficulties encountered by owners or managers and interior designers in effectively showcasing the Malay cultural identity in the restaurant settings. Therefore, the focus of this study is exclusively on traditional Malay restaurants, excluding other varieties of ethnic food establishments. Furthermore, the analysis of the customer experience falls outside the scope of the present study's objectives. To add, the objective of this study is not to provide a description or comparison of the developed framework with the small-scale approach employed in prior research that focused on theming. The main aim of this study is to enhance comprehension of the fundamental components and obstacles faced by conventional Malay restaurants in executing their thematic representation. Moreover, it is imperative to acknowledge that given the exploratory nature of this study, a limited number of restaurants were chosen to be in the sample and it is specifically carried out within the limits of the Klang Valley region. Thus, it should not be extrapolated to encompass all dining establishments universally.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

### **Authenticity**

The quality of being genuine or true to oneself (Taylor, 1991)

### **Ethnic Restaurant**

A restaurant that provides a memorable dining experience and cultural entertainment by fostering a connection between customers and their ethnic heritage and cuisine (Ting et al., 2016).

### **Moderate Upscale Restaurant**

A themed restaurant, also called a concept restaurant, is distinguished from conventional establishments' emphasis on décor, ambience, physical environment, and service staff attire that aligns with a selected theme (Ryu & Jang, 2008).

### **Physical Environment**

Refers to various elements within the restaurant, including décor, artifacts, spatial arrangement, interior and exterior decorations, ambience, and service staff (Mahalingam et al., 2016).

### **Sensory Marketing Strategies**

Strategies in marketing aim to appeal to and influence customers' emotions and behaviour through sensory stimulation, sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing (Krishna, 2012).

### **Traditional Restaurant**

A restaurant that provides local cuisine with a significant historical background, showcasing the gastronomic attributes specific to a particular region (Youn et al., 2020)

## **Traditional Culture**

It encompasses a wide range of human activities such as religious beliefs, philosophical principles, societal norms, ethical codes, historical events, recreational pursuits, literary works, artistic expressions, and ritualistic practices that have been preserved, transmitted, and taught through oral tradition, imitation, or other means over an extended period within a particular community or group (UNESCO, 1989).

### **1.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlights the significant role of the food and beverages industry in Malaysia, with a specific focus on traditional Malay restaurants. It delves into the challenges these restaurants face in terms of their survival and aims to contribute valuable insights into how they can thrive by incorporating the right elements. The upcoming chapter will review previous studies concerning the definition of Malay, the food service industry in Malaysia, the obstacles confronted by ethnic restaurants, and relevant theories related to the subject of this study.

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