

Sustaining Heritage Through Culinary Tourism: Exploring International Tourists' Ethnic Dining Experiences in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract: Ethnic restaurants have emerged as popular venues for cultural and culinary exploration, offering authentic ethnic cuisine and distinctive cultural experiences. In Malaysia, these restaurants serve as valuable spaces for tourists to engage with the multicultural landscape, shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous culinary traditions. This study aims to understand the motivations driving international tourists to dine at Malaysian ethnic restaurants and to explore their dining experiences in the Kuala Lumpur area. A qualitative approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 15 international tourists in key tourist areas. Data were recorded, coded, and analyzed through thematic analysis to gain insight into these tourists' experiences and perceptions. Findings reveal that tourists are primarily motivated by a desire to explore new flavors, cultural authenticity, economic considerations, and the influence of social and digital recommendations. The study further identifies elements that shape dining experiences, including taste preferences, educational aspects within the restaurant, entertainment, cultural immersion, and post-dining reflections. These sensory and social components create a comprehensive, immersive experience that enhances satisfaction and influences tourists' intent to revisit and recommend ethnic dining venues. This study provides insights for restaurant owners and tourism stakeholders, underscoring the value of authentic decor, diverse menu options, and culturally resonant symbols that enrich the dining environment. By understanding the factors that drive tourist satisfaction, restaurants can refine their offerings to meet tourists' expectations, fostering deeper cultural connections and contributing to Malaysia's identity as a culturally rich tourist destination. The findings support strategies to improve service quality and cultural engagement in ethnic restaurants, strengthening their role in Malaysia's tourism sector.

Keywords: *Dining experience, Ethnic restaurant, International tourist, Cultural experiences, Heritage dining*

1. Introduction and Background

Ethnic restaurants have become an integral part of the global dining scene, particularly among consumers drawn to the unique cultural experiences and diverse culinary offerings that these establishments provide. In Malaysia, a nation celebrated for its multicultural identity and rich heritage, ethnic restaurants held a distinctive role, reflecting the fusion of culinary traditions shaped by centuries of interaction among Malay, Chinese, Indian, and various indigenous communities. With an estimated population of 32.68 million in 2020, Malaysia's demography—predominantly Malay (69.3%), followed by Chinese (22.8%) and Indian (6.9%) communities, alongside smaller ethnic groups—underpinned the country's reputation as a "melting pot of Asia" (Kee & Abdullah, 2018; Yusoff & Soltani, 2013). The fourteen states that have in Malaysia have contributed a unique culinary tradition, creating a gastronomic landscape that is rich in regional diversity and cultural depth.

In the multicultural environment, ethnic restaurants served as important channels for both cultural exchange and culinary exploration. These restaurants offered more than food; they created a setting for immersive experiences where people could encounter cultural stories, traditional ingredients, and authentic cooking methods from various ethnic backgrounds. Dining at these ethnic restaurants often provides international tourists with an accessible form of cultural immersion, described as "tourism at home" (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). Such experiences allowed tourists to engage with a different culture within a familiar setting, fostering a deeper appreciation for Malaysia's diverse heritage.

The ethnic dining restaurants seem to reflect broader trends in global tourism, where food has become a focal point of travel, with tourists dedicating substantial portions of their budgets to experiencing local and regional cuisines (Ting et al., 2019). According to a few authors, tourists' attraction to ethnic restaurants was not solely based on the novelty of the food but also on the opportunity to gain cultural insight, get into the social

connections, and fulfil a desire for authenticity (Bell et al., 1994; Gaytán, 2008; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007). Ethnic restaurants met these needs by creating environments where cultural education and sensory satisfaction intertwined, satisfying tourists' cravings for new and memorable experiences. Moreover, tourism behaviors often align with dining experiences, as they encompass motivations related to escapism, social interaction, and the reflection of post-experience (Jang & Eves, 2019; Jeong & Jang, 2011).

The tourists' incoming intentions also affected the experiential appeal of ethnic dining, including repeat visits and positive recommendations, and these often inspired them to travel to the cuisine's country of origin. Thus, ethnic restaurants that have in Malaysia represent a merging of tourism and culinary exploration, providing tourists with taste and cultural experience without leaving the country (Liu & Mattila, 2015). Understanding the elements that drove international tourists' interest in ethnic dining not only informed restaurant management and marketing strategies but also enhanced Malaysia's reputation as a culinary destination that celebrated cultural diversity through its food.

This study addressed the motivations and experiential aspects that drew international tourists to ethnic restaurants in Malaysia, providing insights into how sensory engagement, cultural authenticity, and social interactions shaped the appeal of these establishments. By examining these dimensions, the research contributed to the development of strategies aimed at enhancing the cultural and culinary experiences offered by ethnic restaurants, supporting Malaysia's positioning as a distinctive and culturally rich destination for global tourists.

2. Literature Review

The Concept of Ethnic Restaurants

Ethnic groups are generally defined by distinct cultural markers such as language, attire, and culinary practices, which differentiate them from other communities and are often deeply tied to their regions of origin (Hirschman, 2001). This concept is critical in understanding the framework of ethnic restaurants, which serve as cultural and culinary representations of these groups. Marinković et al. (2015) stated that "ethnic restaurant" is sometimes synonymous with themed establishments that provide consumers with distinctive and often unfamiliar culinary experiences within an atmosphere carefully crafted to reflect the ethos of the represented culture. These restaurants aim to offer an immersive dining experience that encapsulates the cultural and gastronomic essence of a particular ethnic group, enabling patrons to engage with elements of a unique heritage through taste, ambiance, and service.

A defining characteristic of ethnic restaurants is their ability to cater not only to diners but also to potential customers drawn in by various sensory cues—from the establishment's name and menu to the aromas wafting from the kitchen and traditional music playing inside. Tsai and Lu (2012) suggest that ethnic restaurants often diverge from prevailing trends in the restaurant industry, grounded as they are in deeply rooted cultural customs. This emphasis on authenticity is reflected in findings that such establishments balance sophistication with a relaxed atmosphere, creating an experience both unique and enduring (Marinković et al., 2015). Moreover, researchers argue that the authenticity and longevity of ethnic restaurants depend on maintaining high standards in culinary and service quality (Tsai & Lu, 2012). Consequently, ethnic restaurant operators are advised to conceptualize their establishments to deliver not only a satisfying dining experience but also a culturally resonant ambiance. Elements such as decor, furniture, lighting, and seating arrangements significantly influence customers' perceptions, with research showing that cohesive alignment among a restaurant's name, interior, and menu effectively conveys its ethnic theme (Marinković et al., 2015).

Motivation to Visit Ethnic Restaurants

Motivations to attend an ethnic restaurant are often based on the three constructs, namely, pre-experience, during-experience, and post-experience (Nguyen et al., 2020). Before the experience, motivations for experience include seeking novelty, culture exploring, learning and authenticity (Jang, 2017). Identified motives are also met by frequenting ethnic restaurants, as they provide a culturally authentic experience related to the origin of the cuisine and a taste of the unknown in terms of flavours and traditions to be experienced. Yet, as unfamiliarity could be regarded as a potential uncertainty threat on the part of some, this further complicates the decision-making process (Youn & Kim, 2018).

Consumer attitudes toward dining in ethnic restaurants are shaped by multiple factors, including perceived quality, social value, and the establishment's reputation. These attitudes significantly impact the overall enjoyment and satisfaction of the dining experience (Lee & Chung, 2019). Research indicates that motivations for ethnic dining are influenced by factors such as cultural knowledge, perceived cultural distance, and previous experiences, with past encounters playing a particularly prominent role in shaping future dining preferences (Lee & Chung, 2019).

Moreover, a reliable source of information on one hand, such as through media, recommendations from someone, or direct experience creates familiarity and on the other side has an impact on intention to use ethnic restaurants or not. In doing so, these information channels educate diners on the cultural and culinary context of the ethnic dining environment and hence reduce their perceived risks to engage in the ethnic dining experience (Lim et al., 2020) more fully. As a result, previous experiences tend to be critical for service encounters, since they establish expectations in regard to important characteristics such as the quality of food, the ambience and the service have a greater effect on customer attitudes and inclinations than other factors (Jang, 2017).

Post-Dining Experiences

Post-dining behaviors in ethnic restaurants are shaped by the interplay of cuisine, service quality, ambience, and social interactions (Ingerson & Kim, 2016). These elements collectively influence how patrons perceive authenticity, with ethnic restaurants often regarded as “tourism-at-home” experiences that offer cultural immersion without travel. Authenticity in these settings is key, as it fulfills both curiosity and sensory expectations, providing a satisfying experience that is deeply tied to the cultural origins of the cuisine (Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007).

The perceived authenticity and quality of the experience play a significant role in enhancing satisfaction, influencing long-term behaviors such as recommendations, repeat visits, and even a desire to travel to the cuisine's native country (Youn & Kim, 2018; Lu et al., 2015). Positive experiences often lead patrons to incorporate elements of ethnic cuisine into their own lives, whether through experimenting with recipes or using specific ingredients, which strengthens their connection to the culture (Hwang et al, 2018). The unique motivations behind ethnic dining, particularly the quest for cultural authenticity, amplify its impact on future behavior. These experiences act as gateways to ongoing cultural exploration, where ethnic dining becomes more than a meal—it cultivates sustained interest and a deeper engagement with the culture itself.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the motivations and experiences of international tourists dining at ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. Guided by a conceptual framework focused on tourists' reasons for choosing ethnic dining and their related experiences, the study developed in-depth, semi-structured interview questions. In-depth interviews allowed for a nuanced examination of individual perspectives, offering flexibility to explore emerging themes based on participant responses. This approach provided the structure needed to capture rich insights into the complex motives and expectations associated with ethnic dining.

Purposive sampling is a popular method in qualitative research, which, as mentioned by Soebagyo et al. (2021), allows for the inclusion of participants who fit the requirements of the study. International tourists who had dined in ethnic restaurants featuring local Malaysian or culturally representative cuisine were selected from well-known tourist locations in Kuala Lumpur, including KLCC, Pasar Seni, and Bukit Bintang. Researchers selected these tourist attractions as recruitment sites to facilitate access to informants. Data saturation determined the sample size, initially set at ten participants, but expanded to fifteen as needed to achieve comprehensive thematic coverage.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and recorded with consent, a method noted for its adaptability in qualitative research (George, 2022). Thematic analysis helped to identify, organize, code, and categorize data into patterns, which allow for a unified interpretation of participant experiences. To enhance the credibility of the study (Cresswell, 2014). Triangulation was performed involving different sources of data

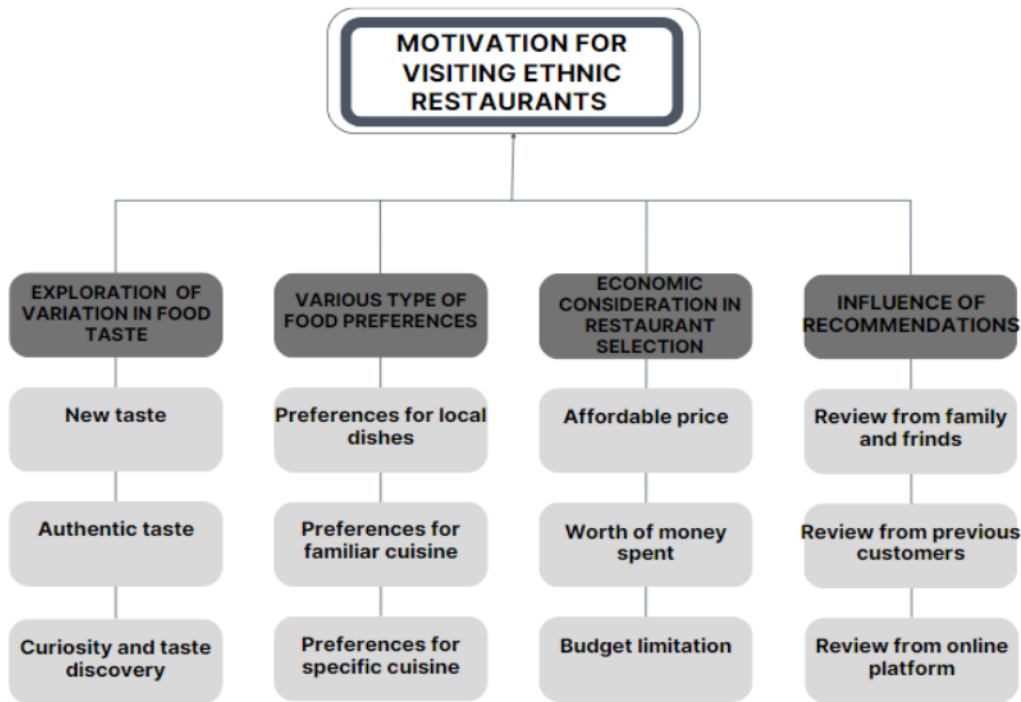
and the results were compared with those of other researchers to avoid some possible biases (Abdalla et al., 2018). Direct quotes and contextual details were incorporated to ensure validity and offer a realistic portrayal of international tourists' motivations, supporting a deeper understanding of ethnic dining as a culturally immersive experience within Malaysian tourism.

4. Findings and Discussion

Motivations for Visiting Ethnic Restaurants in Malaysia

Analysis of interviews with international tourists revealed several key motivations for dining in ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. These include the desire to explore a variety of food flavors, preferences for specific cuisines, economic considerations, and the influence of social and digital recommendations on dining choices, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Findings on motivation for visiting ethnic restaurants



Exploration of New Food Tastes

For many tourists, the search for novelty and adventure is a strong motivator. Dining in an ethnic restaurant offers an opportunity to experience flavors, textures, and ingredients that deviate from their usual diet. The pursuit of new culinary experiences allows individuals to “get a change” from their everyday meals, reflecting a desire for cultural exploration and connection. Interviewees reported that tasting unfamiliar dishes provided insights into local customs, with many, like the Japanese and Indonesian respondents, expressing enthusiasm for contrasting their home cuisine with Malaysian offerings. This drive aligns with tourism motivation theories, where novelty-seeking is pivotal (Jang & Namkung, 2009). The experience of discovering unique yet relatable flavors, as mentioned by respondents from Myanmar, further illustrates how exploring novel tastes can foster a sense of cultural engagement and enjoyment.

“I like to taste food. I would like to try a new taste of food from Malaysia because I would like to know what the difference is between the taste of Malaysian and Japanese food.” (I9, Japan)

“Yeah, of course. We want to try food that we haven't tried before so we can know how it tastes.” (I11, Indonesia)

“Similar dishes but different tastes make me interested and motivated.” (I12, Myanmar)

Varied Food Preferences

The diversity of food in Malaysia allows tourists to indulge specific preferences, ranging from local Malay dishes to familiar cuisines with a regional twist. Respondents expressed interest in trying iconic dishes like nasi lemak and rendang, which have become cultural symbols representing Malaysian heritage. Preferences were also guided by familiarity and comfort; some respondents sought flavors that closely resembled their home cuisine, choosing dishes that felt like “safe options”. Others appreciated the availability of Chinese and Indian cuisine, finding familiarity in flavors that echo elements of their own culture. The attraction to specific, well-known Malaysian dishes demonstrates how food serves as a medium for cultural connection, where tourists can encounter local identity through iconic flavors (Polat & Polat, 2020).

“I prefer choosing dishes that I have never tried before because for me, I travel so far, so why would I eat food that I can buy at home?” (I2, Indonesia)

“I think the biggest reason is because it is close to my actual cuisine in my hometown, like ordering rendang. It’s like a safe option.” (I15, Indonesia)

Economic Considerations

Economic factors significantly influence dining choices, with many tourists seeking affordability while ensuring quality. As Steptoe et al. (1995) assert, financial considerations play a crucial role in consumers' food choices. Interviewees mentioned the importance of balancing quality and price, particularly those from countries with a lower currency value compared to the Malaysian ringgit. For instance, a tourist from Nigeria highlighted the need to find budget-friendly options while ensuring the dining experience was worthwhile. This focus on economic value, aligned with previous research (Choe & Kim, 2018), shows how price sensitivity shapes tourists' decisions, with affordability and perceived quality driving repeat visits to specific restaurants.

“The price range, but if the food is worth trying, I would like to spend my money on it without doubting it.” (I9, Japan)

“So the price is very important, but the quality also matters to me. Even if the price is low, sometimes I don't prefer certain places because quality is more important than price.” (I14, Iran)

“I have to look for the cheapest ethnic restaurants to manage my budget since my country's currency is lower.” (I13, Nigeria)

Influence of Recommendations

Social and digital recommendations play a central role in tourists' dining decisions, with word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly impacting restaurant choice. Many respondents mentioned relying on recommendations from friends, family, and online reviews to guide their dining experiences. For instance, a Japanese tourist noted the influence of her father's advice, given his long-term residence in Malaysia, which offered insight into local dining. Similarly, Indonesian tourists reported consulting platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where visual recommendations sparked interest and influenced their choice of restaurants. eWOM from past customers on online platforms reinforced the value of social proof, with respondents frequently reading reviews to gauge the quality and authenticity of ethnic dining options.

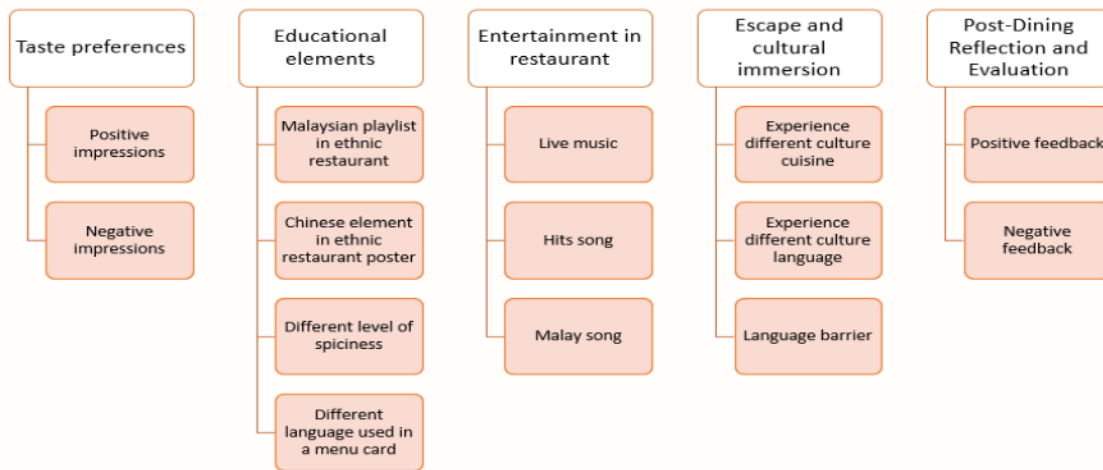
“We always find videos or reviews from the internet... and listen to our Malaysian friends' recommendations.” (I1, Indonesia)

“I usually read the reviews before trying it because from there I know if the restaurant has good reviews.” (I9, Japan)

International Tourists' Dining Experiences

As shown in Figure 2, international tourists' dining experiences in ethnic restaurants in Malaysia were shaped by factors including taste preferences, educational elements, entertainment, cultural immersion, and post-dining reflections.

Figure 2: International tourists' dining experience at ethnic restaurants



Taste Preferences

The sensory experiences associated with taste strongly influenced tourists' perceptions of ethnic restaurants. Many respondents expressed positive reactions to the flavors, highlighting the enjoyment of the distinctive tastes they encountered. However, not all experiences were favorable; for instance, some tourists felt that certain Malaysian dishes were too sweet compared to their home cuisine, which impacted their satisfaction. This interplay between positive and negative taste experiences reflects the broader challenge of meeting diverse international preferences within ethnic restaurant settings.

"Feeling great to know the taste of different cuisine rather than my cuisine." (I11, Thailand)
"I didn't enjoy the experience because the food here is more sugary than in my country." (I13, Nigeria)

Educational Elements

Ethnic restaurants also provided educational opportunities, as tourists encountered various cultural symbols and practices within the dining environment. Examples included listening to local music, observing traditional decor, and reading multilingual menu items, which collectively conveyed cultural authenticity and depth. Tourists noted that the presence of Malay songs, Chinese calligraphy, and Tamil menu descriptions added educational value, allowing them to experience facets of Malaysian culture through their meal.

"Posters in the restaurant sometimes show where the food comes from, like a Chinese restaurant with Chinese elements or writing." (I2, Indonesia)
"In Mandarin or Tamil restaurants, they have explanations on the menu card, but we usually ask the waiter because we don't understand." (I1, Indonesia)

Entertainment in the Dining Environment

Entertainment, particularly through music, enhanced the cultural experience by setting an immersive atmosphere. Respondents noted that live music or playlists featuring Malaysian hits elevated their dining experience, fostering a sense of place. This use of music as a cultural bridge was appreciated by tourists who saved Malaysian songs to remember their experience. Thoughtfully selected music, which resonated with the cultural theme of the restaurant, transformed a meal into a multisensory experience, leaving tourists with lasting memories.

"Usually, music...they will have live music. It adds to the experience." (I1, Indonesia)

Cultural Immersion

Dining in ethnic restaurants served as an immersion in a culture, allowing tourists to experience and learn about local traditions, customs, and languages within a familiar environment. Informants from countries like Turkey and Japan described ethnic dining as a cultural experience, where the ambiance, decor, and staff attire provided a window into Malaysian culture. The language differences also added to this feeling of immersion, creating an experience of "tourism-at-home" (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). This is evident in many ethnic restaurant

strategies, where the management places significant emphasis on the décor to strengthen the cultural identity through the physical environment (Ishak et al, 2023).

"You get to experience different cultures from parts of the world, and you are exposed to what you weren't exposed to before." (I6, Turkey)

"The language also makes me feel like I escaped from my own culture." (I7, Jordan)

Post-Dining Reflection and Evaluation

In the post-dining phase, tourists generally reflected positively on their experiences, with satisfaction linked to factors such as food quality, service, and hygiene. Respondents often reported feeling satisfied, and many stated that cleanliness was a key component of their dining experience. Negative feedback was generally linked to specific taste preferences that did not align with their culinary norms.

"I felt satisfied." (I9, Japan)

"Mostly I was satisfied with those restaurants." (I10, Myanmar)

"If the restaurant is clean and hygienic, I feel good because cleanliness is essential for me." (I14, Iran)

5. Conclusion

This study has provided insights into the motivations and dining experiences of international tourists in Malaysia's ethnic restaurants, revealing how a blend of sensory, cultural, and practical factors influences their choices and satisfaction. Tourists are drawn to ethnic dining for various reasons, including the novelty of exploring unfamiliar flavors, textures, and presentation styles, as well as the opportunity to engage with local customs and traditions through cuisine. The immersive environment of ethnic restaurants—enhanced by cultural decor, traditional music, language elements, and service—allows tourists to feel as though they are participating in a cultural experience, often described as a "tourism-at-home" encounter. These elements, combined with affordability and positive recommendations from both social and digital sources, collectively shape tourists' dining decisions. Their post-dining reflections, shaped by criteria like taste, ambiance, and service quality, reveal that ethnic dining in Malaysia offers a rich, multifaceted experience, connecting tourists with the country's multicultural heritage in meaningful ways.

Theoretically, this study enhances our understanding of tourist dining behaviors in ethnic restaurant contexts, particularly in multicultural settings like Malaysia. By identifying key motivations, such as novelty-seeking, cultural immersion, and practical considerations, this research contributes to the broader literature on cultural tourism and consumer behavior, offering a nuanced perspective on how ethnic dining serves as both a culinary experience and a form of cultural engagement. The study highlights how ethnic restaurants function as cultural spaces that allow tourists to encounter and appreciate local heritage, broadening the scope of cultural tourism research and advancing knowledge on the intersection of food, culture, and tourism.

Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for restaurant owners and tourism stakeholders aiming to enhance their offerings to meet the needs of international tourists. Restaurants can leverage these findings by focusing on elements that align with tourists' expectations, such as creating an authentic ambiance, offering diverse menu options that highlight unique local flavors, and engaging with cultural symbols that enhance the dining environment. By crafting immersive dining experiences that showcase Malaysia's multicultural richness, ethnic restaurants can attract and satisfy tourists, positioning ethnic dining as a cornerstone of the tourist experience and supporting Malaysia's broader tourism objectives by encouraging repeat visits and longer stays. Despite its contributions, the study faced certain limitations, particularly in participant recruitment and data collection. Conducting in-depth interviews with tourists posed challenges due to their limited availability during vacations, and the interview sessions often conflicted with their travel itineraries, leading to lower participation rates. Additionally, while some tourists initially agreed to participate in online follow-ups, response rates were low, reducing consistency in data collection and potentially introducing bias into the findings. This limitation restricts the generalizability of the study, as the limited sample size may not fully represent the diversity of international tourists visiting Malaysia.

To address these limitations, future research might consider alternative data collection methods, such as

shorter surveys conducted directly at restaurants or via social media platforms. These methods could increase tourist participation by minimizing time demands and improving response rates. Clear communication regarding the research purpose and time commitment may also help encourage participation. Targeted recruitment through online forums and social media, with concise and engaging messages that highlight the study's value, could attract a broader and more diverse participant pool. Additionally, while this study utilized qualitative methods to capture in-depth insights, future research could benefit from integrating quantitative methods. Surveys with larger samples could quantify the prevalence of certain motivations and satisfaction factors among tourists, enhancing generalizability and providing a more comprehensive picture of tourists' dining behaviors in ethnic restaurants. Quantitative data could complement the rich qualitative insights gained here, creating a balanced approach that strengthens understanding and supports practical recommendations for the tourism and hospitality sectors.

In conclusion, while these limitations present challenges, they also underscore the importance of adaptable and accessible research approaches in understanding tourist behavior. By employing flexible data collection strategies, integrating quantitative methods, and expanding recruitment efforts, future research can build on this study to gather richer and more reliable insights into how ethnic dining influences the experiences of international tourists, further contributing to the fields of cultural tourism, consumer behavior, and hospitality.

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